

Review: 'Method Gun' triggers viewers' emotions

Erin Keane • March 21, 2010

With just one week left in Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays, it's time to get serious about your tickets. If you only have time to see one show between now and March 28, make it The Rude Mechanicals' "The Method Gun."

The Rude Mechs have created a play that engages the audience's intellect and emotions throughout the performance without ever holding us at arm's length. "The Method Gun," which opened Thursday in the Victor Jory Theatre, is an honest, brave and often hilarious exploration of the creative process and a behind-the-curtain look at process-oriented theater, as absurd and awe-inspiring as it can be.

The most fascinating character in the play never even appears. Legendary acting guru Stella Burden, creator of The Approach ("the world's most dangerous acting technique"), fled New York City for South America in the 1970s and disappears, leaving her students behind to stage Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" using only the minor characters.

Without their teacher, the students seem lost, trying desperately to make her proud in absentia while wondering if they are using their time and talent wisely. The two men (E. Jason Liebrecht and Louisville native Thomas Graves) and three women (Hannah Kenah, Lana Lesley and Shawn Sides, who also directs) keep on working, practicing Stella's exercises — awkward robot kissing, timed crying jags and group improv sessions, all of which are funny at first but become increasingly heartbreaking as they continue.

There's also a suave, wise-cracking tiger lurking in the wings, ready to devour them at any second. Not to mention Stella's loaded gun, suspended in a bird cage, a constant reminder of danger and death.

The Rude Mechs are a collaborative theater ensemble from Austin, Texas, and unlike Stella Burden's students, they don't subscribe to any one artistic method or follow one artist's rules. Though Kirk Lynn wrote the script for "The Method Gun," all of the Mechs were instrumental in its creation and tone.

Ultimately, "The Method Gun" is about courage and risk. Theater is an inherently artificial medium. At face value, what could be more silly than grown men and women playing make-believe for a living and asking us to watch? And yet when artists take risks that require some measure of courage — whether it's on-stage nudity, a wild dance or simple honesty and personal revelation — we can't help but respond.

An amazing thing happens over the course of the play.

The first time the actors attempt the crying exercise, the audience laughs for the duration of the scene. Here are five people standing on stage, facing the audience, crying. They sob skillfully, but they can't convince the audience. The laughter is almost ugly.

The second crying episode was received quite differently on Thursday night, because it followed many acts of obvious risk and courage — culminating in one final, beautiful execution of their version of "A Streetcar Named Desire."

It's rare to see such a tangible illustration of how an artist earns an emotional reaction, but "The Method Gun" is about more than an idea. It's about human connection, between actors and audience, between student and teacher, and between the actors themselves.