

Thom Pain (based on nothing) at Burbage: Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit



Thom Pain at Burbage Theatre

It is difficult to summarize or even explain what *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* is about: a one-man monologue with surreal references to everything from Shakespeare (repeatedly) to the *Song of Songs*. Much of the material involves a somewhat central narrative about a child and a remarkably literal shaggy dog story, to which the monologist often returns after his many digressions. Along the way, for about 70 minutes with no intermission, there is comedy ranging from the cerebral to groan-inducing puns and even a few subversions of jokes that would be at home in vaudeville. The tone is set from the first line, which is stupid but hilarious.

Thom Pain, a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for drama, is intended as a virtuoso opportunity for an actor, and Jeff Church certainly delivers in the title role, playing him as a neurotic, hyper-articulate panhandler whom you know as he approaches you wants something, but never quite gets around to telling you what it is. The closest he comes is where he asks two questions in quick succession: "What would you do if you knew you only had *one day* left to live?" and, after a while, "What would you do if you knew you only had *40 years* left to live?" We're all dying, especially comedians.

Church's comic timing is impressive, perfecting the art of the slow build rather than manic explosion: Jean Shepherd or Spalding Gray rather than Lenny Bruce or Robin Williams. With almost no props other than a chair and dressed in a suit and tie, Church plays a raconteur whose unreliability may be due to either delusion or deceit, but of course the audience has no way to know because, as Samuel Beckett famously said about his characters in *Waiting for Godot* (an obvious inspiration for Will Eno in writing *Thom Pain*), "...all I knew... was in the text, that if I had known more I would have put it in the text..." What I once wrote about *Godot* would apply equally to *Thom Pain*: "...it is the epitome of theatrical form: It cannot be explained, but only experienced. It is impossible to get any sense of the play from merely reading the script: A director must transform the work in the process of putting it onto a stage with real actors." *Thom Pain* is "based on nothing" like *Godot* is "about nothing," and criticism for absence of plot, as I said about *Godot*, "...would be immediately recognized as ridiculous if applied to, for example, [Charlie] Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*: 'People are stuck in a cabin during a snowstorm, one of them tries to eat his shoe, which results in someone turning into a giant chicken, which is later reprised by dancing bread rolls, and a bear randomly shows up.'" Spoiler alert: The play is based on something.

Having seen Church on stage since his student days at Rhode Island College, his growth and maturity as an actor is truly noteworthy. I first noticed him performing the title role (ironically originated by Richard Burbage) in *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe, a truly execrable play made almost watchable by the Sisyphean efforts of the student actors; many years later, he is an adjunct professor of acting at

both RIC and the University of Rhode Island. *Thom Pain* requires first-rate acting talent to be out there for over an hour in front of the audience all alone, nothing to hide behind, assisted by little more than a few clever lighting cues: Church rises to the challenge.

Leaving *Thom Pain*, one has the distinct feeling of having climbed up a mountain to consult the wise sage hermit at the summit, and then climbed back down wondering what the hell he was talking about. What, you expected to learn the meaning of life from a 70-minute play? Then you'll certainly be disappointed. But, if you want 70 minutes of entertaining and hilarious Rorschach-test rambling monologue that sounds like a mix of Edward Albee and Bugs Bunny, Burbage's *Thom Pain* is just the ticket.

A side note: I would not usually bother to critique a director's note in the program, but the one by Vince Petronio is baffling, as I'm not sure to what extent he is deliberately introducing historical errors. Talking about the meaning of the play, three times he explicitly writes, "I don't know." But in his first paragraph, he discusses the historical Thomas Paine, iconoclast of both the American and French revolutions, who insofar as I can tell has nothing to do with this play - which, of course, makes complete sense, as the play claims in its full title to be "based on nothing." Paine at some point changed his surname, as his father went by "Pain" without the "e," like the character in the play. In a series of purported quotes from Paine, Petronio cites, "The only thing necessary for evil to succeed is for..." before explaining that is not from Paine; it isn't clear whether Petronio intentionally quotes an aphorism commonly (but incorrectly) attributed to Edmund Burke, a mortal enemy who sued Paine for seditious libel *in absentia* and had a British arrest warrant sworn out that turned Paine into an international fugitive. Eventually, Petronio misquotes by far the most famous line written by Paine as "These are the times to try men's souls" - correctly, "to" should be "that" - and also incorrectly cites Paine's *Common Sense* as the source, which correctly should be *The American Crisis*. Whether Petronio is just messing with the audience, I don't know.

Thom Pain (based on nothing), by Will Eno, directed by Vince Petronio, Burbage Theatre Company, 249 Roosevelt Ave, Pawtucket. (In rep with *This Is Our Youth*.) One act, 1h10m with no intermission. Through Feb 24. Refreshments available. Web: burbagetheatre.org/thompain E-mail: info@burbagetheatre.org Tel: 401-484-0355 Tickets: app.arts-people.com/index.php?ticketing=burb Facebook: facebook.com/events/235063637413664