

A Behanding in Spokane: 'Tis But a Scratch



Epic Theatre Company offers a black comedy by Martin McDonagh

Cutting off hands evokes numerous metaphorical allusions beyond inherent squeamishness, ranging from the *Gospel of Matthew* to *Llamas with Hats*, but it's puzzling what playwright Martin McDonagh intends by introducing us in his opening scene to Carmichael (Dave Pizzelli), who has not only been looking for his missing hand for 27 years but walks across the stage carrying Chekhov's gun in his remaining one. Set entirely in a fleabag hotel room whose décor has not been updated since a portrait of John F. Kennedy was hung on the wall, we soon meet nebbishy desk clerk guy Mervyn (Nick Bebel) and a young, weed-selling, constantly bickering, interracial couple, Marilyn (Emily Frattarelli Surabian) and Toby (Kevin O. Peterson), who have some "business dealings" with Carmichael. In the course of the next 90 minutes in one act, a lot of chickens come home to roost.

Carmichael wants his severed hand back - although as is repeatedly pointed out to him he has no practical use for it - and he wants everyone within earshot to hear his account of how the hand came to be severed. While this could seem gory, instead it is played cartoonishly for black comedy; producer Kevin Broccoli aptly introduced the play as "like the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino collaborating on a Three Stooges short designed to offend everybody," although it would be difficult to imagine *Blood Simple* and *True Romance* as vehicles for Moe, Larry and Curly. Extensive use of racial epithets, including "nigger" and "cracker," pervade the dialogue, and soon severed body parts are flying like cream pies in the face.

Carmichael dominates the action, so Pizzelli has a substantial challenge in carrying the play in the role of a character whose motivations are never really explained and whose moods whipsaw as his anger alternately explodes and subsides. Carmichael is a monomaniacal man consumed by an obsessive grudge, but his severed hand is something of a MacGuffin. The true looney is passive-aggressive Mervyn who sees the whole situation as an opportunity for a little excitement, even if that involves gunshots, hostage taking, arson, apes and bad puns; Bebel plays him with a pitch-perfect degree of milquetoastiness and delivers the play's best soliloquy. The bickering couple, Marilyn and Toby, are literally prisoners trapped in someone else's life.

As is typical for McDonagh, plot, while present, takes a distinct back seat to character. The real focus of

the play is an exploration of the inconsistent and often contradictory perspectives of each participant in an increasingly absurd situation, brought out with very witty black comedic dialogue. McDonagh is best known for a series of stage works set in his ancestral Ireland and for his screenwriting, notably including *In Bruges*. His stock-in-trade is characters seriously disturbed as a result of traumatic occurrences that may be as easily irrational as rational, as easily surreal as comprehensible. *Behanding* director Rob Roy also previously directed the Kafka-esque *The Pillowman* by the same author at Rhode Island College.

Unfortunately, no matter how well performed, *Behanding* is not the tightest play in terms of narrative structure. We are left wondering how reliable or unreliable is anything we have been told by the characters, each of whom has their own ax to grind, which is certainly deliberate but nevertheless unsatisfying. More importantly, we are intentionally left unsure how much each of these characters bears responsibility for his or her own predicament and how much is due to impersonal and uncontrollable fate.

There is a rather wide philosophical gulf between *Matthew 18:8* ("Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire") and *Llamas with Hats* ("My stomach was making the rumblies that only hands could satisfy"), but it's not clear on which of these shores McDonagh is trying to run aground. That said, even if the destination is unclear, the journey is interesting. No sacred cows are spared in this look at America by an Irish outsider who quite likely has come to see our culture through the lens of Hollywood movies, even if made by the Coen brothers, Quentin Tarantino, and the Three Stooges.

A Behanding in Spokane from Epic Theatre Company inaugurates their new space with the Artists' Exchange Theatre 82 and Café at 82 Rolfe Square, Cranston, RI, on September 20, 21, 27, and 28 at 7:00pm. For ticket information, visit <http://www.artists-exchange.org/abehanding.html>