

The Pillowman

by Christopher Verleger

EDGE Contributor

Friday Feb 1, 2008



Steve Kidd, David Catanzaro and Tony Estrella, seated, in *The Pillowman* at The Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket. (Source: Peter Goldberg)

Few topics, if any, are too serious to be joked about or laughed at these days. Even the most seemingly sensitive subject matters--adultery, alcoholism, drug abuse, terminal illness--have become the backdrop for comedic or satirical works in theater and cinema. Classics like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "The Apartment," as well as more contemporary pieces like "Pulp Fiction" or "The Bucket List" are quintessential examples of troubling or absurd instances that still manage to make us smile. A child in danger, however, is perhaps one of those areas that most would consider impossible to find any humor in, regardless of the circumstances.

Writer Martin McDonagh, with his disturbing yet undeniably brilliant play, **The Pillowman**, showing now through February 24 at Pawtucket's Gamm Theatre, accomplishes that unthinkable and unimaginable feat.

The *Pillowman's* lead character, Katurian, is a short-story writer with a lengthy catalog of mostly unpublished works. A select few of his creations are grisly, gruesome descriptions of innocent children who meet cruel, untimely deaths. Thus far, his only audience has been his mentally-challenged brother, Michal, which justifiably arouses suspicion among the powers-that-be when two children are murdered using almost identical methods taken from Katurian's stories, and another has gone missing. The brothers are taken into custody for questioning and interrogated by veteran officer, Tupolski, and his hotheaded sidekick, Ariel, which is where the dialogue begins. Everything from the walls to the floors to the filing cabinets of the interrogation room is a drab gray, which lends itself perfectly to the cage-like environment.

Katurian proudly defends his stories, and refuses to accept the officers' theory that he is partially--if not entirely--responsible for the deaths because his stories appear to have planted the ideas in the murderer's head. The stories themselves, some of which are enacted on stage, are wrenching and horrific. If you fail to detect any humor, the author does not attempt to make the audience laugh at Katurian's stories or the victims, but rather the interplay among these four men and their varying temperaments. As the conversation ensues, whether it's between both brothers, both officers, or Katurian and his interrogators, the content becomes so intense it's actually funny. Whether the effort is inadvertent or deliberate on the author's part, either way it serves to break the tension during testimony that you wouldn't normally want to watch or be able to hear without cringing.

Since the officers are convinced both brothers are guilty and deserve to be executed, Katurian becomes more concerned with the fate of his stories, rather than his own life, since his belief all along is not what you accomplish but what you leave behind that truly matters. The play also poses the question of which is worse--the idea of something despicable, or acting upon that idea? The answer, and whether or not Katurian and Michal are deserving of their punishment, will haunt you until long after you've left the theater.

The Gamm Theatre's Artistic Director, Tony Estrella, plays Katurian with the perfect blend of pride and insecurity. He doesn't flinch when reciting his own stories, so every word and syllable sounds almost poetic, in spite of the undertone. Meanwhile, when responding to Tupolski and Ariel, he has difficulty muttering a single declarative sentence. Only a seasoned actor could manipulate our language on stage so masterfully. Steve Kidd, as Ariel, plays the wet-behind-the-ears officer with a clenched-teeth stance

that could easily be viewed as shtick, but as the audience becomes better acquainted with him, his profanity and violent disposition are somehow justified. Michal, played by Christopher Francis Byrnes, is perhaps the most consistent, one-dimensional character of the cast. Yet the actor's powerful delivery manages to evoke amusement, empathy and shock in the course of a single scene. And finally, David Catanzaro portrays Tupolski in what could only be described as a transformative performance. The ease in which he essentially becomes the officer on stage is almost frightening, which makes him all the more compelling.

Although those easily upset by the subject matter may understandably think to steer clear, they would be depriving themselves of a truly electrifying theater experience. Admittedly not for the faint at heart, *The Pillowman* is one of those rare, unforgettable works that unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view) doesn't come along often enough.

"The Pillowman" runs through February 24 at The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket, RI. Visit gammtheatre.org or call 401-723-4266 for more information.

Chris Verleger is an avid reader, aspiring novelist and self-professed theater geek from Providence.

[Back to: Theatre » Entertainment » Home](#)