

Theater Review: *The Pillowman* at The Gamm

by Bill Gale
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Playwright Martin McDonagh claims Harold Pinter and David Mamet as two of his favorite authors. Their influence can be seen in his latest play now at Pawtucket's Gamm Theatre. Bill Gale has a review.

"The Pillowman" is a brilliant production of a soaring play. Directed by Peter Sampieri with a deft intertwining of comedy and tragedy, it features some of the best acting seen around Rhode Island in years.

With that said, let me add that this play by the London-born but very Irish Martin McDonagh is a twisting, difficult work, one that will have you laughing out loud as it chills your blood. You may well find yourself sitting there chuckling and then asking "What am I laughing at? That's *slaughter* on the stage"

In "The Pillowman" McDonagh departs from his usual locations in the West of Ireland where he set his best-known work "The Beauty Queen of Leenane." "The Pillowman" takes us into a police station cum torture studio in some undisclosed totalitarian nation. A sweet idealistic little snook of a writer --played with layers of crafty mystery by Tony Estrella -- finds himself in custody -- and in big trouble.

Two detectives soon prove they will stop at nothing to find out whether the writer's stories of child abuse and on-going murderous trauma have a connection to recent crimes in their bailiwick. This barebones description does not begin to tell of the depth--the nearly Shakespearian combining of human love and degradation that follow. "The Pillowman" runs us on a very merry and very horrible race through oceans of on-stage murder and mercy. It then asks us to decide upon the difference between the two, and if one cannot equal the other?

Playwright McDonagh is asking about the artists' responsibility when he or she creates. And by extension he wants to know what responsibility we *all* have for the actions we take in response to the troubles we've experienced. On a grey and smudged black set by Sara Ossana, the cast responds with controlled power to this difficult play. David Catanzaro and Steve Kidd are dueling detectives who will have you giggling one moment and winching the next. Christopher Francis Byrnes is wonderfully clever and winning as the brain-damaged, but acute, brother of the accused.

Or is that the accuser? McDonagh's play is filled with this kind of duality. "The Pillowman" posits one question and then immediately flips it, asks it from the other side. The dialogue is unendingly clever, funny and piercing. Even filled as it is with rough language and on-stage slaughter, "The Pillowman" will keep you guessing, keep you laughing, keep you winching. It is both exhilarating and depressing. It is also theater brave and bold.

"The Pillowman" continues at the Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket through February 24.

Bill Gale reviews the performing arts for WRNI.

