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“ODESSA” TAKES SOME DARK TURNS @ THE RIGHT BRAIN PROJECT

KERSTIN BROOCKMANN · THEATRE REVIEWS



2.5 stars out of 4

In *Odessa*, the ambitious new play by Michaela Heidemann now receiving its premiere in a well-acted and atmospheric production by Right Brain Project, the catacombs that stretch under the streets of Odessa, Ukraine, become a metaphor for the folds of the cerebrum and the twists and turns of memory and perception. It is an inventive premise that often succeeds, but ultimately suffers from the very nature of the convoluted but repetitive windings of both the physical space and human consciousness, as well as a final act that is at once incendiary and implausible. Though, given the slippery grasp on reality afflicting both the protagonist and the audience, this may be intentional. There is a lot to ponder in *Odessa*, from national identity, to the human desire for relevance, to the nature of perception. However, the winding path to understanding--and survival--loses its sense of urgency at times.

Originally excavated by coquina miners in the 19th Century, the multi-

[illegible]

hints of potential violence. Eventually, the feverish visions, real and imagined, spiral into something between absurd and horrifying.

The audience is invited into the catacombs for a tunnel party—all the rage--by the pink-clad, chirpy and ebullient Masha, played with appropriate bubbly energy and Ukrainian accent by Alison Schaufler. After this scene-setter, where the audience is also informed of some of the unnerving aspects of the location, the occasional disappearances, corpses, and gunshots, Andrew is revealed in the beam of Dariya's flashlight. As he slowly regains consciousness, Dariya offers him water, which he initially refuses. She is, after all, the reason he is bloodied and disoriented and in the catacombs in the first place. However, as he recognizes that she also needs to escape the caverns, an uneasy truce is established and their journey to the outside world begins. As they walk, Dariya and Andrew discuss religion, classic rock, and the cultural differences in comedy. Not remarkably, they are soon lost, and Dariya worries that, though she has a tunnel map (not all that helpful, as is evident from the reproduction that serves as a program for the show),

they may not make it out. At this point, things start to get darker, and reality more slippery. As Andrew, Logan Hulick does a great job careening from recrimination and despair to optimistic bravado, all the while convincingly dealing with the aftereffects of being beaten and drugged. Hannah Williams plays the Ukrainian baby gangster to the hilt—she is sardonic and abrasive, except when she reveals that she is just as vulnerable as the American journalist she spends most of the play belittling. Later in the play, Schaufler reappears as Andrew's loving but bizarrely reasonable mother. All three actors do a great job of using the space as a fourth character, and it seems to come alive as they wend their way along the perimeter, through the aisles and over and under platforms, usually lit only by flashlights.

Director and set designer Colin David does his best to create an immersive experience in the tiny Otherworld Theatre, and often succeeds in his endeavor. He creates the illusion of winding paths with a multi-tiered set that wraps around the audience. He adds to the physical obstacles by having the actors create others in the way they move through the space—

sometimes squeezing through narrow passages, sometimes ducking under overhangs throughout the twisty dialogue of the play. He also has guided the actors to create grounded, plausible characterizations while capturing the ebbs and flows of the banal (though often entertaining) chatter and existential panic.

Playwright Michaela Heidemann contributes the engaging graffiti-style paint design. Becc Bartle keeps the various spaces with the tunnels distinct and enhances the mostly flashlight-defined focus. Sound designer Brendan Monte creates some spooky effects and helps set the scene in the world of darkness. Violence designer Justin Verstraete stages the moments of physical threat and actual violence with the right degree of intensity and visceral impact. Accent coach Nikki Hartung keeps the Ukrainian characters in the same world. Finally, make-up artist Raquel Rosen has created realistic and sometimes creepy transformations for the characters who encounter mischief in the labyrinth, beginning with the damage done to Andrew by the gang who left him stranded.

Odessa is an ambitiously ambiguous undertaking. How much of what

transpires is real and how much imagined will no doubt be the subject of debate among attendees. The play occupies a limbo between fear-induced introspection and Ukrainian, subterranean *No Exit*; where it comes to rest is in the eye of the beholder. Its willingness to allow the questions to linger is its strength. Unfortunately, as with the Soviet partisans who sheltered under the streets of Odessa in WWII, we are often trapped in tedious circumlocutions as we try to follow the unspooling plot, and, finally, a bit unwilling to follow it to its explosive but disjointed finale. Director Colin David and his cast commit fully to the convolutions of both the catacombs and the psychological journey it inspires, creating an interesting study of fear and trust. Though the often caustically funny script and production offer much to admire and contemplate, it's hard to keep rooting for the characters through the final twists.

Odessa runs through October 6 at The Otherworld Theatre in The Alchemists Lab space, 3914 N. Clark Street. Performances take place Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 pm and Sundays at 3 pm. September 24 and October 1 are Industry nights. Tickets

are \$20 general admission, \$15 on Sundays and \$10 on Mondays. Tickets can be purchased at <https://dime.io/events/Odessa>. For more information visit www.TheRBP.org or www.theatreinchicago.com.

KERSTIN BROOCKMANN

Kerstin Broockmann spent years working in Chicago storefront theaters, mostly as a director, but also venturing into performing, designing lights and violence, stage management and writing/adaptation. Some of her favorite theatrical experiences include work with Azusa, Pyewacket, Rogue, A Sense of Urgency, The Strange Tree Group, Tinfish and Tripaway. She served for several years on the board of the Women's Theater Alliance and helped coordinate the New Plays Workshop and Festival for two years, as well as editing and contributing to the WTA Newsletter for a spell. Now an AMS-Certified elementary teacher at Intercultural Montessori Language School, Kerstin's directing work in recent years has been limited to staged readings, though she was also able to sneak in a production of *Don Juan in Hell* for Rogue Theater as well. A former amateur boxer, Kerstin has also written ringside reports for the blog Cyber Boxing Zone.



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