



Pentecost at Yale Rep: The intense hostage drama makes big demands, but captures your attention.

Pentecost

Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven
Through Dec. 2

Pentecost, David Edgar's panorama of emotional discourse and cultural dissimulation, has a cast larger than those of *Denial* and *Robbers* combined, and most theaters couldn't afford its scope, unless they had the student-actor resources of the Yale School of Drama. The production involves deep intellectual discourse, bursts of brassy comedy, full-frontal nudity, gunfire, wholesale destruction, suspense, and a gigantic Byzantine-styled, Giotto-esque artwork.

Pentecost requires a level of attention and patience that theatergoers are rarely required to give these days. The play's equal-length first and second halves seem to be virtually separate works, until act two's physical violence interrupts the end of act one. Then act one's elaboration on art, daily survival, and hard-held ideals circles 'round to close out the drama.

The coalescence, and the characterizations, work, and the immense cast is necessary for a feeling of community to develop. The acting could be more clipped, expansive, demonstrative—mock-heroic makes more sense than the soap-operatic we're given. Director Stan Wojewodski could've choreographed the ensemble more carefully, but he's found the heart of the piece. There's nothing he can do about the time and energy it takes to get there.

The breadth of *Pentecost* underscores the old saw that there are no small parts, only small actors. There are overplayed roles and underwritten roles, and roles which are both, such as Brandy Zarle's game try at a Samantha Fox-y celebrity-vamp, the play's weakest shot at comedy relief. But even the shallower parts fuel the greater whole. Large-cast straight drama is such a rarity on these shores that it's an education to see a well-written one even unevenly played.

Edgar inserts numerous pop culture references in the drama to instill senses of irony or irreverence. These will keep you awake during the philosophical rants between gunshots and a naked priest. Some effects (the gradual uncovering of a wall-sized artwork, explosions) are magnificent, others (incoming terrorists) are puzzlingly lackluster. Yet as you become accustomed to and less impressed by the blasted environment of "an abandoned church in an unnamed South-east European country," the human contents of that environment start to be more than cats and mice. They speak in different languages, they doll up in each other's clothes, the bond and they fear. Nowhere is this more brilliantly written or staged than in a second-act round-robin of storytelling and joketelling that is part confessional, part game of Charades, and part campfire entertainment.

It takes a lot of exposition and scene-setting to get to a point where such outpourings come off as deep, meaningful and non-clichéd. *Pentecost* challenges you to commit. Take the dare. Some attendees are likely to feel that they've been taken hostage themselves. Others, like myself, will be awed by the wealth of ideas. Look at the local theater season so far: The floozy *Jekyll & Hyde*, the summerstocked *Dial M for Murder*, the loopy *Le Cirque Invisible*, the cartoonish *As You Like It...* *Pentecost* makes it safe to think in the theater again. ■

basic character-improvisation exercises. "It was basic, but when you give a schizophrenic patient, who's in a cake of ice himself, who's never seen himself, and give him an opportunity to come out of himself..."

Kessler was fortunate to study with Lee Strassberg at the Actors Studio, who encouraged Kessler to direct. He's a generous and collaborative playwright. With set designers, and stage managers it may be another story: *Robbers* has over 20 short scenes and constantly shifting locations. "I never thought about what would be done onstage," he says.

But Kessler believes in the magic of theater. "I was a magician when I was a kid. I did escape tricks.... I've been trying to escape for a long time."

Denial

(Preview)

Long Wharf Theatre Newton Schenck Stage, New Haven
Through Jan. 6

By contrast, Peter Sagal is the respectful upstart overjoyed at the reception he's been given so early in his career. *Denial* is the sort of script at which progressive theaters jump: In it, a female Jewish lawyer decides to argue, on First Amendment principles, the case of a man who preaches that the Holocaust never happened. Arvin Brown himself is directing *Denial* for Long Wharf, the first full production the script's had.

"I wanted to write on a Jewish theme," says the 30-year-old Sagal, a former literary manager at the L.A. Theater Center, "but although

I'm a Jewish guy, I'm about as assimilated as you can get." His thoughts turned to how prejudiced provocateurs like the Neo-Nazis discover and exploit the psychological weaknesses of their victims. "If you were a racist who happened to hate blacks, you wouldn't argue that slavery never happened. There are other methods that have proven more effective. Why is *history* the best way to get at Jewish people?"

The antagonistic anti-Semite in the play is a mild-mannered expert in "timber stress," played by Max Wright, a Yale Rep regular from the Robert Brustein days, not to mention the human father figure on the TV puppetcom *ALF*. "Nobody in the world thinks of himself as a villain, but there is this tendency for actors to *act* villainous. Max doesn't do that. The play involves many different arguments, and I wanted to make sure that they all have the same level of integrity. If you're going to confront an illness, you have to show it."

Wright's character exhaustively details his theories, culled from actual books from the Holocaust-myth literary subgenre. During rehearsals, Sagal says, "there was a lot of personal feeling in the room. Bonnie Franklin [who plays the lawyer] has done a lot of work for the Anti-Defamation League. The Rabin assassination happened. The militia movement thing. We've all been dragged kicking and screaming into this debate.

"I started writing this as a First Amendment absolutist. I ended it as a First Amendment absolutist, but with a soberness about what that entails."