Cabrillo’s ‘Black Snow’ puts protagonist through series of unfortunate events; hilarity ensues

Reality and satire are the same,” said dissenting Soviet writer Vladimir Voinovich in reference to his country. “I thought that was a great quote,” says David Ohanesian, dramaturg at Cabrillo College Theater Arts. “It made me think about today in the United States, and I was thinking about how many of us get our news and our sense of American life through satiric comedies these days—and how it almost makes it easier to swallow the indignities.”

It’s also a quote that applies particularly well to “Black Snow,” Cabrillo College Theater Arts’ fall production. The play—which runs Nov. 2-18—is a comedy that follows a playwright’s ill-fated collaboration with a legendary theater director in a climate of government oppression. As it turns out, the play draws heavily upon its own origins. “Black Snow”—adapted into a play by American playwright Keith Reddin in 1993—is based on the fictionalized memoir of Mikhail Bulgakov, a Soviet Russian writer and playwright who was active in the first half of the 20th century.

“He had a big 10-year interlude working with the Moscow Art Theatre, but by 1929 his plays were banned by the Soviet Bolsheviks,” explains director Robin Aronson. “So then finally he wrote a letter to Stalin basically saying, ‘My plays can’t get produced, I’m being destroyed, I’m facing destitution and death.’” Stalin answered Bulgakov’s plea by sending him back to the Moscow Art Theatre. “And then he just had this hellacious four-year experience trying to get one play produced by the theatre, and the rehearsals never ended, and they could never get the play up; when they finally did it lasted for seven performances, and then the censors shut it down again,” says Aronson. “Whether it’s the critics, the censors, or the theater practices of the time, this poor oppressed playwright is just completely demolished—but he took his pain and created a satire.”

The element of satire bridges the gap between the play’s period setting and the audience’s modern context. “In Bulgakov’s time, you couldn’t make any overt political comments; you had to do it through satire,” says Ohanesian. “There is something contemporary in the portrayal of the sort of machine that this guy has fallen into.”

The most noticeable departure from the text in Cabrillo’s adaptation of “Black Snow” is the decision to split the main character of Sergei—the Bulgakov figure—into two separate parts. “The way the play is structured, the character narrates his own experience, so in the course of the play he’s both living the experience and narrating the experience,” says Aronson, who used that distinction to split the character into narrator-Sergei and participant-Sergei.

“You can tell that my character is relating it as a past event,” says Davis Banta, who plays the narrator-Sergei. “So he knows these outcomes and what they’re going to lead to, whereas Alex [the other Sergei]’s character is still naïve, and so it’s kind of playing with the dichotomy of where we’re coming from—sometimes I relive a scene with a sense of what it’s going to lead to, or when a plot element happens it’s hitting him hardest because it’s for the first time.”

Considering “Black Snow” is a play about the theater, it makes sense that the cast and crew would be able to relate to the narrative. What’s interesting is how the process of producing a play informs the actual
"Black Snow" runs Nov. 2-18 at the Cabrillo College Black Box Theater, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. $19/general, $17/seniors and students, $12/under 10. 479-6154. Visit cabrillovapa.com. Photo: Steve DiBartolomeo

Comments (0)

Write comment

Name

Comment below—comments are moderated and may not post immediately. No Spam please.

smaller | bigger

I have read and agree to the Terms of Usage.

Add Comment

Powered by Azrul's Jom Comment for Joomla!

Author of this article: Mark Joseph Davey

See Other Articles From This Author

- Tillman the Surfing Bulldog (21 June 2012)
- Pacific Avenue (12 June 2012)
- NOW HIRING (18 May 2012)
- Wine Bars and Wineries in Santa Cruz County (23 March 2012)
- Santa Cruz Happy Hour Directory (22 February 2012)
- Amgen, Again (21 February 2012)
- Stuck on Santa Cruz (24 January 2012)

Share this on your social networks
