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Holy Sheet!

No matter how much you want to, don't close your eyes during *The Pillowman*.

By Alan Scherstuhl

The shame is that print can't shout. Too bad the fancy new presses that spit out this Cynthia Levin rag can't add a pop-up Nathan Darrow bleeding from the head, or a glossy Rusty Sneary, or an MP3 of these two excellent Kansas City actors raising holy hell with their dialogue in *The Pillowman*. I just hope I can somehow snag the attention of movie-reared folks for whom attending plays is as old-fashioned as blowing glass or brewing soap or hanging out at Silver Dollar City.

Take any movie you see this year, and Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* will kick its head in. Here's a show that'll grab you by your tenderest parts and not let go for 150 minutes, a show double-stuffed with shock effects, gallows humor, narrative twists and scenes of nerve-fraying tension.

It even has some ideas, but not so many as to gum up the story.

That story centers on a writer, Katurian, arrested and tortured by a totalitarian dictator's thugs for crimes that he didn't commit. Katurian's short stories — fabulist horrors to which we're often treated — frequently involve the creative murder of children; when kids from around town turn up dead, mutilated in the style of Katurian's mostly unpublished work, both he and his mentally disabled brother are hauled off to the interrogation room to account for themselves ... and, they're soon told, to be executed.

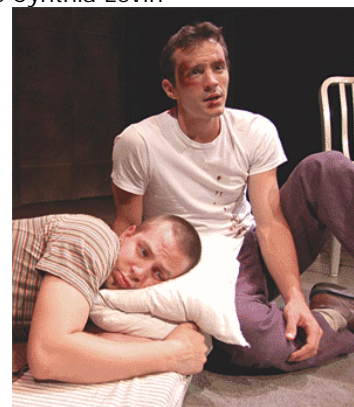
This all brings to mind Kafka, Solzhenitsyn and others who foresaw or chronicled Eastern bloc nightmares. But for McDonagh, the gulag is more a genre to mine than it is a theme to develop — this story is about totalitarian politics the same way *Jurassic Park* is about paleontology. Instead, movies are his inspiration. McDonagh's brutal, talk-drunk comedies have more Tarantino in them than Pinter, and they're after nothing so much as making stories on the stage as visceral as those on the screen.

This means violence — all of it, in this case, staged with tasteful viciousness by director Joe Price. His characters attack one another, verbally and physically, making us laugh and also flinch; for some reason, these acts of cruelty, the kinds of things moviegoers gobble up like popcorn, get stuck in the throats of some theatergoers. They should consider the craft: You'll rarely hear funnier profanity or see violence more smartly conceived than in a McDonagh play. That he lately has abandoned plays for film is little surprise. After bringing movie energy to the legitimate theater, where it's needed, maybe he can bring some of the theater's thoughtfulness to idiot Hollywood.

It helps that this brand of entertainment is so sharply staged by Price, the Unicorn's designers and a quartet of my favorite actors. They've filmed the most violent scenes so that we see them on a screen instead of live, which gives Katurian's fiction a storybook nastiness. Though wittily frightening, the films don't sting as much as if we'd seen the violence acted out live — more evidence, perhaps, of cinema's desensitizing effects.

Enduring interrogation and torture, Nathan Darrow's Katurian demonstrates a stirring defiance. His resolve that, if nothing else, his stories must survive moves us despite the *content* of those stories. When paired with Sneary, who plays brother Michal, Darrow hits new highs. Both actors are extraordinary in an act-length scene they share alone together in an interrogation room, moving naturally, often touchingly, through treacherous emotional terrain. Childhood trauma has left Michal brain-damaged, hugging pillows and moaning about an itchy butt. Sneary makes Michal comic without making him broad, but mostly he makes him sad, even wrenching, which heightens both the funny and the scary. His is haunted, memorable work.

As the chief investigator, Darryl Stamp has good moments but sometimes moves too quickly and too lightly, speaking some lines so fast that they hardly register. His partner, Ariel, the man who dispenses the beatings, is played by the imposing Mateusz Lewczenko. Looming hugely, his head freshly shaved, Lewczenko at first calls to mind the German mechanic that Indiana Jones fights beneath an airplane in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but the



Suffer the children: Rusty Sneary (left) and Nathan Darrow in *The Pillowman*.

Details

Who / What:

The Pillowman

Details:

Through September 24, 816-531-7529 ext.10

Where:

The Unicorn Theatre, 3828 Main

character and performance soon deepen, with Lewczenko finding tenderness in this tough guy.

All four actors relish McDonagh's dialogue. It's fierce and free, discursive and often hilarious. Highlights include Michal explaining what he hopes he'll do when he gets to heaven: "Hang out with God and them. And have races." And Tupolski the investigator, musing about the night's grisly work: "To execute a writer, it sends a signal, you know? [Pause.] I don't know what signal it sends out, that's not really my area, but it sends out a signal."

What is most shocking about this purportedly shocking play is how funny and tender it is. The opening-night crowd at times laughed so hard that even the actors seemed surprised, and even though the tales of children's deaths chill, they're gorgeously abstract, more outraged than outrageous. This is all just a story, McDonagh seems to be telling us, and all the hints of politics — of thought crimes, of governments happy to torture — are just notions compared to his true idea: how much we like wild stories.