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A cautionary tale for theatergoers

Some stage productions are issuing warnings about potentially offensive material.

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Actor Mateusz Lewczenko (portraying Ariel) gouged the eye of actor Nathan Darrow (portraying Katurian) during a rehearsal for "The Pillowman" at the Unicorn Theatre.

Leave the kids home.

That's what Cynthia Levin tells people planning to see "The Pillowman" at the Unicorn Theatre.

And she concedes that the play — which depicts and describes harrowing scenes of violence — may be too intense for some adult viewers.

After all, seeing severed toes scattered across a tabletop isn't everyone's idea of a good time.

The Unicorn's Web site provides a synopsis of the play and advises viewers that the show contains violence and strong language and is not recommended for children or "those who are easily offended."

But Levin doesn't really like warning labels and ratings systems for plays.

"I don't want to condescend to the Kansas City audience," said Levin, the company's producing artistic director, "because for 90 percent of the Unicorn audience, this is what they want."

But more regional theaters, even those that don't produce particularly controversial shows, have turned to warnings and rating systems in an effort to help viewers make informed choices — and to avoid howls of protest from people who have been offended, appalled or outraged.

Kansas City Actors Theatre posts signs in the lobby of the H&R Block City Stage at Union Station warning of language and onstage smoking in the "Talley" trilogy. American Heartland Theatre includes a PG-13 rating in its promotional materials for its popular production of "Menopause the Musical." Elsewhere, some companies planning productions of "The Pillowman" are advising theatergoers of the play's violence.

"This play contains scenes and language that some may find disturbing," the Alley Theatre in Houston tells visitors to its Web site.

"Extremely disturbing subject matter" is how the Citadel Theater in Edmonton, Alberta, describes the play.

Although most theatergoers who attend the Unicorn know the nonprofit midtown theater has a long track record of producing controversial plays, Levin said there will always be some ticket buyers who don't know what they're letting themselves in for.

"On our very strong shows we've posted warnings of some kind, certainly if there's nudity, because for some reason people are most offended by that," Levin said.

There's no nudity or sex in "The Pillowman," which begins performances at the Unicorn on Aug. 30. Just violence and grim humor. Even in New York, some theatergoers were unprepared. Levin said that when she saw it on Broadway last year, some left at intermission.

"And that's going to happen," she said. "I would say a third of our shows, some people have not been able to stomach them."

"The Pillowman," which has claimed theater awards on both sides of the Atlantic, is the work of Anglo-Irish writer Martin McDonagh, whose brutally comic plays often call for explicit onstage violence. In his "The Lieutenant of Inishmore," characters are shot in the head and the stage becomes littered with severed limbs. In "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," staged at the Unicorn in 1999, an angry daughter tortures her mother by pouring boiling cooking oil on her hands.

"The Pillowman" is set in a totalitarian state and depicts a police interrogation of a writer whose violent short stories are uncomfortably similar to a series of child murders the police are investigating. Some of his tales, which include disturbing cruelty to children, are enacted during the play. The script calls for them to be performed "live," but they will be seen in projected film sequences at the Unicorn. Levin thinks that might help cushion the audience from the horrific images.

The play also depicts adult-on-adult violence, and its characters often use raw language. Still, Levin said, theatergoers should be open to different kinds of plays. She thinks they have to bear some responsibility for educating themselves.

"Would you put a warning on it if it was a really sad show?" she asked. "I think there should be a warning (for some plays) that says, 'There's absolutely no intellectual benefit to this show at all.' "

Bob Rohlf, president of the Starlight Theatre Association, said the generally family-friendly venue uses warning advisories when appropriate. Even so, he said, the outdoor theater receives complaints on almost every production.

"When we do 'Peter Pan' we get complaints," Rohlf said. "There's a line in the show: Somebody says, 'You silly ass.' We'll get a complaint about that line. When we do 'Oklahoma!' we'll get complaints about the (erotic) dream sequence because somebody was watching and realized what the dream sequence was about."

Rohlf said Starlight puts ratings on shows "if there's any question that they might contain material we think an audience member might be surprised by. We put a disclaimer on every ad and at every gate to the theater."

The New Theatre Restaurant occasionally receives complaints about language, from " 'hell' and 'damn' on up," said marketing director Rob McGraw, although the theater generally doesn't use warnings.

When the theater earlier this year produced "Say Goodnight Gracie," which depicts the life and career of comedian George Burns, some people didn't like his cigar, which the actor portraying Burns lit twice but never actually smoked.

Levin said the Unicorn show that generated the most complaints in recent years was Edward Albee's "The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?" The play's intentionally absurd premise is that a man confesses to his wife that he is in love with a goat.

"People were outraged by the subject matter," Levin said. "It threw me. I have to say, most of the comments I got (were from people who) thought it was interesting and relevant and metaphorical. But it just really upset some people."

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