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UNICORN THEATRE | Martin McDonagh does it again

Dark, funny 'Pillowman' haunts

Disturbing, comedic and relevant, this story will stay with you.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
The Kansas City Star

He has an amazing ability to create a play that allows us to laugh at some of the darkest aspects of humanity.

DIRECTOR JOE PRICE (LEFT) ON "THE PILLOWMAN" PLAYWRIGHT MARTIN MCDONAGH



PARKER ESHELMAN | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

"The Pillowman" lead actor Nathan Darrow is filmed in front of a screen at UMKC so a background can be added later. The scene will be a part of the live play.



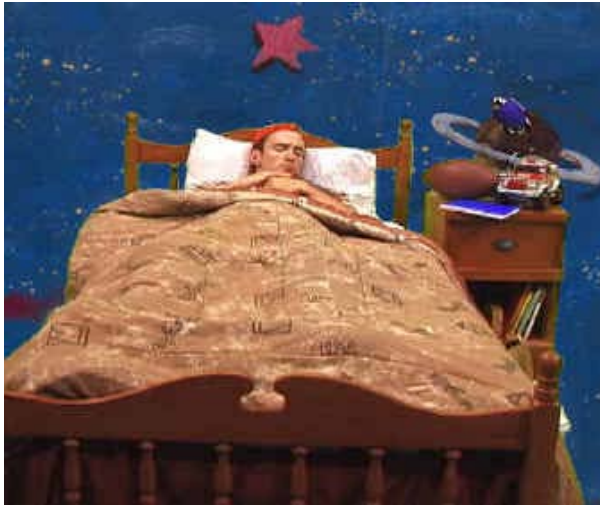
SUSAN PFANNMULLER | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Detective Ariel, played by Mateusz Lewczenko, roughs up murder suspect Katurian, played by Nathan Darrow, in "The Pillowman."



PHOTOS BY MARK TITUS | UNICORN THEATRE

"It was the night of his seventh birthday that the nightmares first started," Katurian (Nathan Darrow), a writer suspected of being a serial killer, tells the audience as a filmed version of his horror story is projected on stage. The script calls for certain Katurian stories to be enacted as he relates them, and director Joe Price chose to shoot the sequences on video. In these before-and-after stills the childhood version of Katurian is shown at left as it was shot, with Darrow in bed before a green screen. Later a background illustration by Adriana Sandoval was added digitally.



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SUSAN PFANNMULLER | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"In the midst of all the darkness and violence and bitter humor of it I feel like there's this tenderness that's trying to reach through," says Darrow of "Pillowman."

Paranoia. Psychological torture. Physical torture. Mutilation. Morbid fantasies. What more could you ask for in a comedy?

That's what director Joe Price wants people to remember about Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman." It's dark, brutal, unsettling, unforgiving — and very funny.

But then that's true, more or less, of every McDonagh play. His "The Lieutenant of Inishmore" has kept Broadway audiences in stitches since spring with its Irish caricatures, pistol shots to the head, sprays of stage blood and dismembered corpses.

"He has an amazing ability to create a play that allows us to laugh at some of the darkest aspects of humanity," says Price, who's staging "The Pillowman" for the Unicorn Theatre. "And in so doing, he allows us the opportunity to face those grim realities in a way that's maybe a little easier."

Interrogation

If you boiled the play down to its essence, it's really just a little story — a story about a storyteller, a storyteller who spins tales that are simple, elegant and grotesque. Set in an unnamed totalitarian state, the play begins with a police interrogation.

Katurian, the author of mainly unpublished short stories, has been hauled in by two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel. They want to question him because some of his violent stories — full of child abuse and written in the uncluttered style of

children's fairy tales — seem to mirror a series of child murders they're investigating. (The production will let the audience see some of those stories in filmed sequences.)

The question put before the audience early in the play is who killed the children? Was it Katurian or his mentally challenged brother, Michal? Do the cops care who did it, or do they just want an excuse to kill a writer? Is torturing confessions out of people more important than the actual confession?

In "Pillowman," McDonagh tries to tap into the inherent absurdity, nightmarish though it may be, of life under totalitarianism. There are no right answers or wrong answers. But the next answer you give could be your last.

Playwright is 'a great storyteller'

The play, which opened in London in 2004 and played Broadway last year, seems particularly relevant at a time when torture is in the news, JonBenet Ramsey is back in the headlines, Russia is reverting to its old police-state ways and artists, as usual, are acceptable only if they can pass themselves off as entertainers.

"There are playwrights and filmmakers who write about the darker aspects of what it is to be human and the uglier parts of humanity, but I think it's pretty amazing that he can do it and get us to sort of laugh at it," Price says. "He's a great storyteller. He has great characters and plot twists and surprises."

Actors love McDonagh's plays for three main reasons: the language, the detailed characters and the masterful plot reversals.

After Nathan Darrow, who plays Katurian, read the play for the first time, his head was swimming.

"It sort of knocks you back in your seat," Darrow says. "It's just oddly beautiful. In the midst of all the darkness and violence and bitter humor of it I feel like there's this tenderness that's trying to reach through ... I would love to work on this play in any capacity. That was my first thought."

Afternoon soap operas

McDonagh, 36, wrote a draft of "The Pillowman" along with all of his other produced plays during a nine-month explosion of creativity in 1994. He lived alone in London and wrote every day with a pencil in a spiral notebook, according to a profile in the *New Yorker* by critic and theater historian Fintan O'Toole. "The Pillowman" is his only play not set in an imaginary Ireland, the country of his parents' birth.

He wrote in the mornings and in the afternoon watched television soap operas, which, O'Toole suggested, taught him technique.

"By now, he had read dozens of plays, but he had seen only half a dozen on stage," O'Toole wrote. "Yet, his drafts reveal a sure grasp of the mechanics of dramatic narrative — an understanding of how to move characters in and out of scenes gracefully, plant crucial information in seemingly insignificant scenes early on, and, conversely, hide information by presenting it at a time when the audience is distracted by a joke or an episode of violence."

Challenging characters, complex emotions

Actor Mateusz Lewczenko at first thought he was right for the role of Michal but became more interested in playing Ariel, the detective who because of his own traumatic childhood has declared war on all child-abusers. McDonagh's play represents something Lewczenko thinks the theater needs more of: dramas by and for young people.

"My first reaction was finally there's something that's going to be in the theater that people of my generation and my taste will get to see live that isn't diluted for the conservative audience," he says. "The opportunity (for viewers) to be in the same room with these characters is going to be awesome."

Michal will be played by Rusty Snearly. "Pillowman" will be his third play about killers in a year.

"Every role I get (at the Unicorn) scares the hell out of me," Snearly says. "Not only is this a difficult character, I could easily make it an offensive character if I'm not careful. It's a fine line when you're playing a mentally challenged character."

Darryl Stamp accepted the role of Tupolski just four days before rehearsals began after Walter Copping had to withdraw from the production.

"He is one of the more challenging and complicated characters that I've had the good fortune to play in quite a while," Stamp says. "He's all about business, but he has a perverse enjoyment of playing cat and mouse with his subjects."

Onstage, more than just a horror show

McDonagh's plays are always a little like a trip to the circus: His skill is dazzling, his plot twists are breathtaking, his dialogue is mesmerizing and his audacity is astounding. His dialogue is poetic and brutally direct and the emotional and physical violence on stage create a visceral style of theater that stands alone.

But it's more than a horror show. "The Pillowman" is, among other things, an unsentimental celebration of the storyteller's art.

"At the center of it is a story about an artist who believes fully in his work and the importance of it and, potentially, its lasting impact on the world," Price says.

Sneary, on the other hand, hesitates to articulate the play's meaning. As Katurian says at one point, the storyteller's responsibility is to tell a story.

"How far should we take something that's meant to be art?" Sneary says. "How seriously should it be taken? And how serious is it? What is it meant to do? Does it all have to be meaningful? Can't it just be art? It doesn't mean that it's right or wrong or morally objectionable. It's just a story."

Lewczenko has a similar view: "Just doing the play doesn't mean there are answers. It just means there are more questions now. And that's cool."

show preview

The final preview of "The Pillowman" is at 8 tonight at the Unicorn Theatre, 3828 Main St. The play opens Friday and runs through Sept. 24. Tickets cost \$18 to \$28. Call (816) 531-7529 or visit unicorntheatre.org.