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THEATER REVIEW | 'Pillowman'

Stuffed with smarts

Sneary is spectacular in violent, dramatic comedy.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
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SUSAN PFANNMULLER | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Michal (Rusty Sneary, left) and his brother Katurian (Nathan Darrow) are questioned about a series of murders.

I'm a sucker for smart actors.

And the actors in the Unicorn Theatre production of Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" are very smart. They have to be, because McDonagh's play demands it.

That's because McDonagh is a smart playwright who expects audiences to pay attention even as he tries to blow their minds with sheer audacity. This production, directed by Joe Price, is a success, for the most part, even if the play concludes on an elliptical, oddly unsatisfying note. His performers are clearly invested in the material, and one of them, Rusty Sneary, is simply spectacular.

This is a dramatic comedy, as horrifying as it is absurd, that begins with two detectives (Darryl Stamp and Mateusz Lewczenko) interrogating a writer of short stories with the same first, middle and last name: Katurian (Nathan Darrow). The cops are investigating a series of child murders, and some of their grisly details seem to match those in Katurian's horror stories told in the simple style of fairy tales.

It quickly becomes clear that Katurian isn't the only suspect. So is his brother, the mentally challenged Michal (Sneary), who has been detained in a holding cell just down the hall. To reveal more would be to give too much away, because McDonagh is a master of plot reversals and unexpected twists.

At the end of the day McDonagh's play is a sort of perverse celebration of the writer's art. The storyteller's first duty is to tell a story, Katurian tells the cops. It's as if the exercise of writing — of making up stories — is an act of purity. The sources of inspiration don't matter. The affect on readers doesn't matter. The unintended consequences don't matter. Only the story matters.

Darrow is an appealing Katurian, a man who can't believe he has found himself in a waking nightmare just because he likes to write stories full of violence and cruelty to children. Stamp taps into Detective Tupolksi's calm sadism; he's charming at times, able to affect a reasonable tone — even if he is a bureaucratic reptile in a suit.

Lewczenko makes an impressive Unicorn debut as Ariel, the detective who lives to exact punishment on child abusers. Lewczenko expertly navigates this unpredictable character's curious journey, evoking as much empathy as revulsion.

As Michal, Sneary is amazing. The character may be mentally challenged, but he can be witty and sarcastic, and Sneary has some of the play's most effective comic lines. He imbues the character with precise physical tics and walks a fine line between credibility and caricature.

Two of Katurian's stories are illustrated in extended surrealistic video sequences that aren't as polished as they need to be. They do, however, generate chilling moments.

'The Pillowman'

- **When:** Friday, Sept. 1 (through Sept. 24)
- **Where:** Unicorn Theatre
- **Attendance:** 150 (approx.)
- **Tickets:** \$28; (816) 531-7529; unicorntheatre.org

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