

The Impossible Dream

By Alan Scherstuhl

You'll hear about the controversy before you hear about the play. You'll hear that *The Pillowman*, which opened Friday at the Unicorn Theatre (3828 Main, 816-531-7529), is grisly; that New York was scandalized; that Irish playwright Martin McDonagh is addicted to gore, shock and cheap sensation.

You might even hear that *The Pillowman* — a harrowing, human and sometimes comic fantasy of a writer imprisoned and tortured by the state for what he dares to imagine — is just for those with the stomach for it, that some patrons are complaining, that people are walking out at intermission.

What you probably won't hear is that it's urgent art and that each day in this country, it grows more so.

"At the heart of it is an artist trying to save his work," director Joe Price says. "*The Pillowman's* set in a totalitarian regime. There's some Romania there, some Ceausescu ... and there are subtle suggestions in the language indicating it might be British. But I think it's America. We're doing it with American actors and American voices."

The violence, then, is controversy No. 1. Controversy No. 2 is the politics. Price thinks of Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and those horrifying photos better known almost everywhere else in the world than they are here. He points out recent incidents of theatrical censorship, such as the Fulton, Missouri, high school that received angry letters lambasting an already-expurgated production of *Grease* as inappropriate. "They sanitized *Grease*, still got the letters and then canceled *The Crucible*," he says, dismayed at the banning of American theater's greatest expression of freethinking.

He sighs. "Someone saw the footage we shot for this and said, 'You're going to get picketed.'"

Which brings us to controversy No. 3: the children. The short stories that McDonagh's imprisoned writer is striving to save detail the gutting of children. The video footage shot by Price and the Unicorn's Jeff Cady brings some of these stories to life.

"Turn on CNN," Price says. "Not a week goes by without a child's abduction. At the center of all these stories is abuse. We can take it if it's real, but not here?"

Grotesque as this may sound, child murders are as much the point here as child sex is to *Lolita*. McDonagh presents us with a man incarcerated for what he fantasizes, not for what he does. Anytime imagination — no matter how dark — is outlawed, the show becomes about us.

All this heavy talk notwithstanding, McDonagh is a born entertainer, and this should be a show (today's performance begins at 3 p.m.) of vicious jokes, Grand Guignol effects and beefy scenes of interrogation for a quartet of our absolute best young actors: Nathan Darrow, Rusty Sneary, Darryl Stamp and Mateusz Lewczenko, all of whom are being worked through the wringer. Our guess is that it's this fall's single can't-miss play; our hope is that Kansas Citians realize that outrage is better focused at all the things that the play is about rather than the play itself.

Date/Time: Tuesdays-Sundays. Continues through Sept. 24

Unicorn Theatre 

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<http://www.unicorntheatre.org>