**Theater Reviews**

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“Rom Project” Tells Hidden Stories of the Holocaust

By Ann Donnelly, ‘06

Staff Writer

When I left Workshop Theater after “The Rom Project,” a new work written and directed by Jessica Barkl, I could not leave the lobby for about 30 minutes, and had to first sit and process what I had seen. If reading about the Holocaust is painful, to watch human beings rounded up and murdered, families destroyed, and a vivid, beautiful culture erased from history is nothing short of paralyzing.

“The Rom Project,” adapted from the novel “And the Violins Stopped Playing” by Alexander Ramati, tells the story of the European gypsies, or Roma, and their persecution and extermination during the Holocaust, a story that gets only a one-line mention in most Holocaust literature. The novel is based on true accounts and tells the story of Roman Mirga (played by Jonathan Rabunski), a Romani boy who learns of the Nazi deportation of other groups of gypsies and tries to warn his clan. Though they initially resist, the clan flees, and is captured and deported to the concentration camp of Auschwitz, where Roman, because of his Aryan appearance, becomes the favorite of Dr. Josef Mengele (Bryan Steele) and is forced to assist with his medical experiments on gypsy children.

During the Holocaust, 500,000 European gypsies died in concentration camps, and many others were arrested, sterilized, or forced into hiding due to their perceived racial inferiority. “The Rom Project” incorporated traditional music, dance, myth, and storytelling, along with an extremely strong and cohesive ensemble cast, to create a visually stunning and painfully human portrait of this largely ignored and stigmatized culture.

Though only in rehearsal since the beginning of the semester, “The Rom Project” was a year in the making. “We got an assignment in Stuart Spencer’s playwrighting class to write a play on a historical subject, and I had always wanted to be able to research my culture, which I knew nothing about,” says Barkl, whose family is of Romani descent. “The unfortunate thing about the gypsy culture is most of them are illiterate, so there are very few existing narratives.” Barkl relates that the theater department approached the project with some trepidation, due to the unfamiliarity wit the style and the fact that the original script would have taken six hours to perform.

The Rom Project is performed in the “book-it” style of theater, a method developed for devising theater pieces from existing novels, in which the actor describes what the characters sees or does in addition to saying his or her lines. Barkl favored this method because it makes the audience use their imagination. The actor won’t look exactly the way the character is described in the book, but it lets the audience see it as such… “You never have to over-act because it’s all there for you, you just say it.” Barkl was inspired by a production of John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*, presented by the Book-It Repertory Company in Seattle, Washington. It was, according to Barkl, “a fifteen-hour experience, and the most engaging piece of theater I have ever seen.” She hoped that she could engage Sarah Lawrence audiences the same way.

The opportunity to learn about the Holocaust, play multiple roles, and receive extensive ensemble training appealed to many students, inside and outside the theater department. In addition to book-it, Barkl also incorporated Suzuki, (a method of vocal training using awkward physical positions,) yoga, Meisner, and Viewpoints, (which encourages actors to incorporate every aspect of the space). She also gave the actors extensive reading material about the Roma and had them research and create presentations about various aspects of Romani culture.

Character development was an intense experience for many actors. Senior Paul Simon described the process of becoming Sandu Mirga as “interesting” because “there was more discussion of it between cast members and outside of rehearsal than in most plays. It was important for actors playing members of families to meet and come up with family histories, to help flesh out the relationships they have with one another, because there’s not a whole lot of family interaction in the text.”

First-year student Gretchen York, who played Roma matriarch Rosa Mirga, became heavily involved in the process as well: “To begin work on Rosa, I watched women close in age to Rosa to start to integrate her physicality…Emotionally, Rosa came from living within her three hours a day…She is so in love with love, with life, with her people.”

Fun was crucial to surviving the rehearsal process for many, since the second act of the play is set in the Auschwitz concentration camp and ensemble members were “killed” three or four times a night. According to cast member Donna Leterese, jokes would fly backstage, and many cast members relaxed together after rehearsals and performances.

It was clear that “The Rom Project” is a work in progress: A need to establish the conventions of book-it made parts of the first act seem stilted, and the length of the presentation drove away some viewers at intermission. For some, as well, the cheerfully ending in which Roman, his sister Mara (Donna Letterese), and family friend Koro (Geoff Falksen) survive and tell the story of their people, followed by a dazzling all-cast curtain call, seemed inconsistent after shocking and accosting an audience with the horrors of Auschwitz. I, however, found it a beautiful counterpart to the tragedy that called attention to what the “Project” is really about: a celebration of love, family, culture, and the human spirit.

Barkl intends to continue the project, but first must obtain the rights to the title and text of the book. If she cannot obtain the rights, she still hopes to keep telling the story of the Roma and working with the book-it style. “Book-it is very presentational and involves the audience. I think what’s wrong with American theater most of the time is just bad storytelling.”

“Liasons tangle in ‘Admissions’”

By Barry Gaines

For the Albuquerque Journal

Tuesday, November 9, 2004

For the next two weeks, the University of New Mexico’s fifth annual Words Afire Festival is lighting up stages around the city. Student playwrights have the cherished opportunity to see their new plays in production in front of an audience, an experience that no staged reading can match.

The first of 16 world premier productions, “Admissions” by Lou Clark, opened at UNM’s Theatre X. A student of the master of fine arts Dramatic Writing Program, Clark has had her plays performed in Seattle and Albuquerque.

“Admissions” is set at an eastern private university in the Admissions Department where counselor/recruiters make decisions that impact the lives of the faceless applicants. The play begins as three advisers return from recruiting trips.

Andre is the senior counselor who hopes that the dean will appoint him director of admissions. Parthy and Hank are advisers who met when they were freshmen at the school six years earlier. Carolyn (Dodie Montgomery) is a career counselor with a child, and Rosa (Elsa Menédez) is the harried secretary who answers the endlessly ringing phone.

Beneath the surface of this academic office seethes sexual intrigue. Parthy fell for Hank when they met as freshmen, and we see stages of their relationship through flashbacks. Their sexual entanglement changes when Hank admits he is gay, and their imbroglio grows more complex when Parthy learns that Hank is having sex with Andre, who is also have sex with the dean. There are a lot of admissions to be made.

The script is cinematic in its transitions between past and present. Director Jessica Barkl handles these scene shifts in low light with soothing cello music bridges by Karen Cardon while Parthy and Hank make minor clothing and hair changes.

Annalyse Arguelles brings wholesomeness to Parthy, while Jon Manto is a handsome Hank who came to college on a lacrosse scholarship. Jeremy Chasez plays Andre with stereotypical prissiness. Unfortunately, the attractions that should coruscate around this love triangle are missing. The constantly changing emotions in the script are not evident in the performances.

Vernon Pointras imbues the cross-dressing dean with malice and pathos, a tricky combination.

The continually shifting stories of past and present do not always merge comfortably, but the play is an ambitious study of love, friendship, and sexual identity.

“Jessica Barkl Shines in ‘Cymbeline’ at the Adobe”

By Kelly Koepke

For Albuquerque Arts

There must be reasons why many of Shakespeare’s plays are rarely performed. The American Shakespeare Project’s adaptation of Cymbeline at the Adobe Theatre, on of the Bard’s later efforts, illustrated why this play of mistaken identity, a gender-bending heroine, scheming noblemen and a clueless king doesn’t often find staging.

All we needed was a bit with a dog to wrap up all the required elements for a good stage production. We’ve go lovely costumes, ambitious props and staging, a cast of many, several of whom acquitted well the physical and verbal requirements of the play.

Jessica Barkl, as Imogen, the princess daughter of King Cymbeline was bright up and comer who understands the rhythm of Shakespeare’s language. She also made a convincing youth when dressed in boys’ clothes, full of energy and vigor. By contrast, few of her fellow actors seemed to understand what it was they were saying. This made for a long night of stilted speeches. Thank goodness for the detailed plot synopsis in the program to follow the action.

One of Barkl’s comrades, Lori Stewart, gave the Queen a regal air that, unfortunately, turned almost comic because of her costume’s stiff framing collar, reminiscent of the wicked queen in Snow White. Stewart’s lovely manner and strong delivery won her admiration from the audience.

Albuquerque theater veteran Vernon Poitras is wasted as Belarius, a lord who kidnapped Cymbeline’s two sons and is raising them in the forest. His delivery, poise and presence are an assest to any production. I’d have liked to see him in a bigger part. Jack Terrance’s Iachimo was zesty with experience and lusty in seduction of the innocent Imogen.

in order to keep the play at a reasonable length (the mind will only absorb what the rear end can endure), the adaptation chopped several second act scenes, choosing voice over narration to bring the action up to speed. Though I understood the need, the device was most un-Shakesperean and smacked of a dues ex machina to bring the play to conclusion.

Still, for lovers of the Bard and fans of community theater, Cymbeline is a treat, if only for Barkl’s sparkling performance.

Company Delivers An Engaging 'Cymbeline'

By Barry Gaines
For the Albuquerque Journal
    REVIEW: "Cymbeline" is one of Shakespeare's last plays, a bizarre fairy story that recycles plots from "Macbeth," "King Lear" and "Othello." It is a tragicomedy, an amalgam of comedy and tragedy where characters undergo the sorrows of tragedy that are eventually resolved in a happy ending. With thirty-seven speaking roles, props such as a headless torso, and scenes including Jupiter flying in on an eagle and throwing a thunderbolt, the play is a challenge for any theater company.
    In The American Shakespeare Project's "Cymbeline" at the Adobe, director Preston Mendenhall has eliminated many of the characters (Jupiter is gone) and uses narration to replace several scenes. Although it is truncated and uneven, the production is still enjoyable.
    "Cymbeline's" plot defies encapsulation; it has everything— a wicked stepmother, a loving couple separated and reunited, an Italian villain, a foolish prince, a poisonous potion, a decapitation, two kidnapped princes, a chastity wager, cross dressing and more.
    As King Cymbeline, Frank DeLillo is hesitant with Shakespeare's verse. Veteran Lori Stewart, however, plays his wicked wife with vivacious villainy. Her son, the rotten Cloten, is presented with vacuous verve by Scott Bryan.
    The cave-keepers are well-played by Vernon Poitras, Drew Groves and Bryan Chapman, who all add pleasant singing voices to their acting skills.
    Jack Terrance performs Iachimo well; his appearance from a trunk in Imogen's bedroom is funny and disquieting. Aaron Smith is stalwart as the loyal servant Pisanio, and John Wylie makes a fine Cornelius.
    As the lovers Posthumous and Imogen, Daniel T. Cornish and Jessica Barkl are not well matched. Cornish is stiff and limited in his emotions. With his best speeches cut, he has little to do toward the end of the play.
    On the other hand, Barkl has sparkle. She engagingly explores the range of her character's passions. Her speech over the beheaded corpse is intense.
    Lori Stewart's costumes are serviceable, although Imogen's first gown is too long. The set design by Mendenhall and Nigel Philcox is clever, but the scene-shifting is awkward and noisy.
    Despite the cuts, the play's last scene, with more twists and dips than a roller-coaster ride, is still funny if not quite magical. To their credit, the company delivers Shakespeare's complex language with comprehension and clarity, a mark of the work of artistic director David Nava.
    How often does one have a chance to see "Cymbeline"? It plays Fridays and Saturdays at 8 and Sundays at 2 through March 6. Call 898-9222 for information.

**365 Days/365 Plays by Suzan-Lori Parks (June 30)**

By [Journal Staff](http://www.abqjournal.com/main/author/admin) on Sat, Jun 30, 2007



In mid-November 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks decided to write a new play every day for a year. Last November, on the anniversary of that decision, the resulting work 365 Days/365 Plays began to be performed in over 700 theaters and acting spaces around the country.

Each week a new group of plays is premiered in a variety of locations. For Week #33 the VSA North Fourth Art Center is one of seventeen premiere sites. Moreover, the week’s seven plays are each being performed three times by six local theatrical companies—all in less than two hours. The playlets have a minimum of dialogue. There is little of Parks’s verbal brilliance that led Tony Kushner, author of “Angels in America,” to call her “one of the most important dramatists America has produced.” The plays do offer opportunities for imaginative settings and interpretations by the various dramatic groups.

One of N4th Theater’s resident troupes, In Strange Company, opens with “Interference” and “More Interference” featuring a motley group of dancers including a bearded male wearing leotard and tutu. Jessica Barkl and Markus Maurette direct their contributions. Equilibrium Theater Company (ETC) is another resident company represented. ETC is a “mixed-ability” company dedicated to changing society’s attitudes toward people with disabilities. Tonya Rivera uses her alternative augmentative communication device to speak a line of dialogue from her wheelchair in “$1 for Gas,” directed by Molly Kohl. The Magic Lizard Theater Company, part of UNM’s Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program, performs “3 Uses of Gravity.”

In the show’s second part, Repertoire Soul Noir and OmniRootZ alternate the playlets and fill them with music and dance. They effectively use two muslin-covered screens, backlit with shades of red, and projections on the large screen at the back of the stage area. Young Mamie Yanu and Keiran Freeman adorably perform flamenco and break dancing. In the final segment the playlets are interpreted by Mother Road Theater Company, more experienced local actors. They also perform the plays as continuous and at times outrageous. The sight of John Hardman in drag—feathered hat and boa, short skirt, and high dominatrix boots—is not soon forgotten, try as we might. Michael Dolce and Kristin De La O almost make sense of “My Used to Be.” Vic Browder directs. Letting my avant-garde down for a moment, however, I must question whether the enterprise is more than a theatrical stunt. The literary quality is minimal and the acting wildly uneven. Still, it is a world premiere. “365 Days/365 Plays” runs Sunday at 6 p.m. at VSA North Fourth Art Center, 4904 Fourth NW. Free. Call 344-4542.

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| Thursday, 05 April 2007  |
| mageBY JONISE ORIE  **The 2007 Albuquerque Shakespeare Festival** continues full-steam ahead with a performance of *Macbeth* at the Vortex Theatre. And what would a Shakespeare Festival be without Macbeth? As Shakespeare’s shortest and most action-packed tragedy, its inclusion in the festival is presumed.Interestingly, this festival came about in a coincidental manner. According to director **Chad Brummett** (actor and producing director for **Tricklock Theatre Company**), because so many Shakespeare performances were happening in Albuquerque this spring, **VSA N4th Art Center’s Jessica Barkl** had the idea to link these shows into one festival. Thus, uniting the various theater companies in Albuquerque to promote their shows as a larger event.   |

**Review: The Oresteia – Live!**

By Barry Gaines

For the Albuquerque Journal

Monday, September 24, 2007

In Strange Company continues to subdue dramatic classics at the North Fourth Theater, and nothing is more classic the “The Oresteia” by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, first performed in 458 BCE. This trilogy of plays tells of the god-cursed House of Atreus, stories of blood and vengeance.

Here is quick synopsis: Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, kings of Argos and Sparta, who marry sisters Clytemnestra and Helen. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have three children: Iphegenia, Orestes, and Electra. When Helen is abducted by the Trojan Paris, the Greeks attack Troy. After a decade of fighting, the Greeks bet on a Trojan horse and win the war. In the process Agamamnon sacrifices Iphigenia, and his wife awaits his return to seek revenge. Clytemnestra kills her husband and marries his double first cousin Aegisthus. That couple is in turn killed by Orestes with the help of his sister Electra. But Orestes is tormented by the Furies, female personifications of vengeance, until gods Apollo and Athena intervene and substitute trial by jury for the never-ending, family-centered blood revenge. And you though the Sopranos were kinky!

In Strange Company has adapted the three plays into a one-hour radio show being broadcast live by four performers the Kastroupel Sisters – an amalgam of the otherwise anonymous actors’ last names (Molly Kohl, Susan Stroupe, and Jessica Barkl) – and Gary Mahoney (Garrick Garcia). The women wear WWII-era khaki blouses, black ties tucked into khaki skirts, and matching garrison caps – sort of WAC-y. Garcia wears a blue jumpsuit with military patches and cap. These four dramatize the story in pre-TV-radio style with sound effects, commercials, and news flashes. The characters often break out in dance and 1940s songs, nicely accompanied by pianist Drew Carlin. All the performers are likable and the song parodies range from sophomoric to clever. Kohl as Clytemnestra belts out “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” Barkl as Electra sings “Why was I born to love you” to her dead father, and the Furies sing “Who’s Sorry Now” à la the Andrews Sisters. There are plenty of laughs: Agamemnon’s tomb is an old console radio, and Barkl and Garcia present a spirited variation of the classic Abbott and Costello routine “Who’s on First.” There were lighting problems early, and the use of the vintage radio mikes were inconsistent, but the hour was fun.