

Arts & Culture

April 19, 2007

The Montgomery County Sentinel

11

THEATER

Powerful *Crime and Punishment* pays rich rewards

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Old college joke, especially for English majors. What's *Crime and Punishment* about? Oh about 850 pages.

All joking aside, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel is a true classic, easily one of the best works to ever come out of Russia and a milestone in 19th century literature. The way it combines psychological insight and spiritual probing, all wrapped into an engaging detective story format, makes it unique and endlessly fascinating. On a much more mundane level, the creators of *Columbo* acknowledged that the deceptively bumbling inspector Porfiry in *Crime* was the inspiration for their TV character.

But *Crime and Punishment* is long and that scares away many readers. How do you adapt something so large and complex onto the stage? Amazingly, there is a powerful 90-minute one act version on this sprawling novel currently at Round House Theater in Bethesda, and director Blake Robison and his three person cast present a gripping production of this tale.

Adapters Marilyn Campbell and Curt Columbus bravely cut right to the heart of the

Crime and Punishment Round House Theater

★★★★



PHOTO BY STAN BAROUH

Tonya Beckman Ross (as Sonia) and Aubrey Deeker (as Raskolnikov) in Round House Theatre's bold, new adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*.

story. Yes there are dozens of characters and subplots that fall by the wayside – I recall a particularly rowdy dinner scene with people stamping across the table that is nowhere to be seen here. But the result is a lean and uncluttered look into the heart of this novel. It hooks into the central themes and questions in this novel and focuses relentlessly on them.

The main plot is that a poor starving student named Raskolnikov gets delusions of su-

periority (right out of Nietzsche it seems) and feels he is above the law. He kills a rather nasty old woman, and then another who walks in as the crime is being committed. We know the crime and who committed it, the questions revolve around guilt and confession – confession to one's self, to the law and to God.

Aubrey Deeker manages the tricky feat of making us feel for Raskolnikov despite his unsavory actions. The production, like so much of

the novel, is inside Raskolnikov's mind and Deeker makes it a fascinating journey into the lower realms. Mitchell Hebert has a unique take on Porfiry – neither Sherlock Holmes nor bumbling Columbo. Hebert's detective throws out comments almost absent-mindedly that later cut right to the heart of the case.

Best of all is Tonya Beckman Ross as Sonia, the first in a long line of prostitutes with a heart of gold. It could so easily become a cliché performance but Ross is energetic and honest in the role. It should be added that both Hebert and Ross momentarily take on other roles – Ross as the murder victim and Hebert as Sonia's wretched father – but the main focus remains the three central characters.

Robin Shapley's elegant set is a circular metal colored affair that gives the impression of a tilted interrogation room, and Kenton Yeager's lighting often contracts and focuses its laser like intensity on a single individual (usually Deeker) as if to further isolate these characters from the society around them.

In the end, this production keeps returning to its central themes. Is redemption possible? Is confession necessary? How can someone basically good go so wrong? These are very theological questions, but a true greatness of Dostoyevsky (and this production) is that it never feels preachy.

Crime and Punishment continues at Round House Theater Center in Bethesda through April 29. For more information, call (240) 644-1100.

The Drawer Boy reaps a bumper crop of laughter

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

A rare offering from north of the border, the Canadian play *The Drawer Boy* is a fascinating mix of styles. Quite funny in places, more serious in others and all wrapped around a central mystery. But not like any mystery out of Agatha Christie.

Silver Spring Stage is currently mounting an excellent production of this very tricky play, which was done to great acclaim at Round House Theater a few seasons ago. The central premise of this play actually happened. Rochdale College in Canada sent out students to farm communities where they gathered information, creating plays on the spot. Michael Healey's script imagines what may have happened on one of these farms.

The Drawer Boy Silver Spring Stage

★★★★

It starts off with the comical concept of college boy out of water down on the farm. Matthew Boliek plays Miles, a young actor trying to get information from two reticent farmers about what their lives are like. These initial scenes are frequently hilarious as the farmer Morgan puts Miles through his paces. Ted Schneider plays Morgan with deadpan humor as he pulls the wool over Miles's eyes time and time again with tall tales and ridiculous farm duties. Plus nothing is funnier than the scene where Miles tries to get in touch with his inner cow.

But what about the other farmer, Angus? Something happened during World War II that caused Angus's brain injury, and actor Steve LaRocque plays the character as part naïve child and part pent-up adult. Morgan tells Angus a story – where the title of the play comes from – that explains what happened to Angus during the war.

As Miles continues his acting and rehearsing and probes deeper into the farmers' lives, is that the true story? What really did happen to



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Matthew Boliek (Miles), Stephen LaRocque (Angus) and Ted Schneider (Morgan) in *The Drawer Boy*.

Angus and Morgan during the war?

This is a deceptively simple play, but it's actually quite difficult to pull off. Director Bridget Muehlberger keeps everything in focus and moving swiftly. She and her three actors let us see these characters from many different viewpoints and we have shifting feelings about each until the final scene. Boliek makes Miles both earnest and dense as he learns about farm

life and the two men he is with. Schneider can be paternally gentle and then more mysterious as Morgan, the one person who does know the full story. The hardest part of all has to be Angus, but LaRocque gives us a childlike adult with almost no short-term memory who gradually does start to put the pieces together. LaRocque manages to keep all options open for his character, so that the final answers to these questions can go a number of different ways. And for once, Healey's final revelations are worth waiting for.

John Decker's set is a simple one-room construct filled with props to hint at a fully functioning farm. I would like to see some of the between scene interludes in Act One tightened – some were a little long on opening night – but otherwise this is a strong production of a play that is laugh out loud funny but with a mysterious central core waiting to be discovered.

Plus Act II starts off with a version of *Hamlet* that even the Bard may not recognize.

The Drawer Boy continues at Silver Spring Stage through May 6. For reservations, call (301) 593-6036.