

Prayer, Predators, Population and People who 'Pack'

Written by Steve Callahan

Last night my hope for American theatre was refreshingly renewed by OnSite Theatre's new show at the Meskerem Restaurant on South Grand. OnSite, of course, does only plays written for specific unusual sites: a bowling alley, a laundromat, a bar, a youth hostel and such. Their productions are always good, and sometimes—like this time—they're remarkably fine. If you ever get tired of seeing plays that seem to be just "the same old same old" you should take in something by OnSite. Playwright Carter Lewis gives us three short pieces grouped under the title, "Prayer for the Gun Bug."

In the first, called "No Preying", two women friends gossip over dinner about a recent Evangelical meeting at the restaurant. Something, it seems, had gone terribly wrong and caused a major disturbance. Ever since then the restaurant has posted a 'NO PRAYING' sign. One lady is an atheist; she thinks that the question of belief in God makes no more sense than asking whether one believes in a six-foot-tall preying mantis. Well, who should walk in but a six-foot-tall preying mantis. When he sits at a table, crosses himself, and presents his arms in that species' typical "praying" posture our atheist friend berates him for violating the posted house rule. There follows a delicious exchange full of rather wise—and decidedly funny—observations about conflicting personal rights and about our peculiar needs and rituals: "Yes," says the Mantis, "after mating our females do bite off the male's head and eat him, but this is all for the benefit of the future children. In your species I think you call it 'child support'."

The second playlet, entitled "A Geometric Digression of the Species," shows an affluent couple at dinner discussing world overpopulation. Malthus was right, we see, and now there are six billion people scrambling for space. What does this do to our sense of the worth of the individual. We become, at the same time, desperate for solitude and desperate for intimacy. The playwright very cleverly brings home, again and again, the fact that the crowded world (i.e. the audience) is enviously watching this couple luxuriating in their precious table-space—eager for them to get the hell out.

The final piece is called "Art Control". At dinner a man tells his wife of a symphony concert where, toward the end of the 1812 Overture, the conductor pulled out an AK47 and fired into the ceiling for every cannon shot. The whole orchestra was "packing" and they all blasted gloriously away. The man is relishing his dinner, but his wife can't even begin hers because the waiter neglected to bring her any injera, that Ethiopian bread like a giant, spongy crêpe, that's used instead of silverware. Time and again a waiter carries some past to another table. Finally the desperate wife pulls out a pistol and demands her injera; the waiter responds with a gun of his own; then everybody's waving guns around—except for the policeman who intervenes to calm things down. At this point an irate woman springs up from the audience. "This is supposed to be entertaining!" she cries. "How can a character be entertaining if he doesn't have a gun? In the Second Amendment Jesus guarantees everybody the right to a gun!" Here the playwright fires out a full-bore parody of the archetypical Missouri conservative (and of our legislature). "What we want is Jesus, guns and normal sex!!"

This odd piece finally dissolves into explorations of meta-theatre and anomie, and there's a romantic ballroom turn featuring the irate lady and the giant mantis. It's all a little unstructured, but still delightful.

The members of the cast are all quite splendid. They are Gary Wayne Barker, Peggy Billo, Paul Edwards, Jacqueline Thompson and Pete Winfrey. (Winfrey manages to make the Mantis both civilized and menacing.) Kudos to director Bill Whitaker and costumer Robert Van Dillen. But most of all I congratulate playwright Carter Lewis, who brings us deeply thoughtful, balanced, important ideas—all brimming with sparkling fresh humor. Thank you OnSite Theatre. (And thank you Meskerem Restaurant for a most delicious meal.)

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