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Stage Door Review



The Road to Damascus

Tuesday, July 9, 2019

★★★★☆

by Dominique Ziegler, translated and directed by David Eden

To Hell and Back Company, Toronto Fringe Festival,
Tarragon Extraspace, Toronto
July 5-13, 2019

Swiss playwright Dominique Ziegler's *The Road to Damascus* (*La Route du Levant*) from 2015 is receiving its English-language premiere at the Toronto Fringe Festival. The show takes up the incendiary topics of Islamophobia and Muslim extremism and depicts them in the microcosm of an interviewer and an interviewee in a suburban French police station. Ziegler gives the interaction between the two the form of a thrilling cat-and-mouse game where the two roles keep changing.

The action begins when an older Cop (Daniel Coe), after watching

videos, unseen by us, of people moaning and screaming, leads in the Young Guy (Ethan Saulnier), a 27-year-old Frenchman who has converted to Islam and become radicalized through contacts he formed in the Muslim community in his neighbourhood. The Young Guy has been pulled in because, though unemployed, he had a plane ticket to Istanbul in his pocket along with €3000. The Cop assumes that the Young Guy's final destination is Syria where he hopes to receive terrorist training and return to France to wreak havoc. The Young Guy insists that having found Islam his journey is a one-way trip to a place where Muslims are not persecuted and where he can live under sharia law.

The interview becomes a debate in which the Cop asks the Young Guy how he can abandon his family and the French republic that has educated him and come to his aid while the Young Guy tells the Cop that France and the West have become godless and totally corrupt. The Cop asks the Young Guy why he doesn't condemn terrorists use of violence to bring about a new order, to which the Young Guy points out that the French republic, to bring about the rule of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, was founded by violence, beheadings and the Reign of Terror.

As the action progresses, it becomes apparent that this is no ordinary police interview and that neither the Cop nor the Young Guy is really who they had claimed to be. The action takes a surprising turn at the end in which neither the views of the Cop nor of the Young Guy can be said to dominate.

Translator David Eden proves an able director of the play, ratcheting up the tension between the two characters until we fear an explosion of some kind is immanent. Ethan Saulnier is excellent as the Young Guy, who is filled with anger from the very beginning. Yet, Saulnier reveals that the Young Guy's anger is much more profound than feeling he is being unjustly harassed. It is a revulsion against the whole way of life that the Cop is defending. For his part, Daniel Coo may initially seem rather too gentle and understanding to do the job he has been assigned. But Coo shows how the Cop's penchant for alcohol disinhibits him enough to press on with his relentless questioning and less seemly duties.

It is because of Ziegler's even-handedness in allowing a would-be jihadi to explain his point of view that there are likely many places in the world where *The Road to Damascus* could not be staged. Fortunately Toronto is not among these because it is important to discover why European youth

could become so disaffected with their families and nations that they would join extremist groups to overthrow the value systems they shared before their conversion.

Despite this, the play condemns the extremism of both Muslims and Islamophobes and demonstrates that extra-legal tactics are self-defeating. The play is meant to be provocative and is sure to lead to long discussions afterwards about one of the key movements occurring in our increasingly fragmented world.

Christopher Hoile

Note: This review is a Stage Door exclusive.

Photos: Ethan Saulnier as the Young Guy and Daniel Coe as the Cop. © 2019 David Eden.


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