

ARTS

Decameron: tragicomedy deserves more attention

by Dave Cox

Yesterday I got a chance to have a brief interview with one of the actors in the *Decameron* production on now at SUB Theatre. His name is Jean Archambault; and the twenty minutes I spent with him persuaded me more than all the advertising I had seen that the show would be a "must see." This is how it went:

Gateway: I didn't get to see the play last night, unfortunately, but I gather it is a black comedy with a political shock message, or rather alternating comedy and horror. Is that right?

Jean: Well, yes, it's a combination. Mainly, what sticks out is the tragedy with comic relief, because of the situation. Inevitably, you come back to reality, which helps with the comedy because life is like that, a mixture.

Gateway: What kind of special challenges does the play pose for the actors? What is your character's role, for example?

Jean: The five of us are prisoner. Our aim is to survive—the challenge is to live. The challenge of the comedy is that you can become many characters; even a horse, a prop. It's challenging to go from tragedy to comedy at the drop of a hat.

A prisoner always has to find something funny; and yet there is always the fear of death. There is a constant duality in the characters.

Gateway: I hear that there are a few surprises for the audience. What do you

envison their reaction being? How would you feel reacting as one of the audience?

Jean: Totally traumatized. I first saw the show in French, I know what it's like to be the audience. You're never sure of the development—when you expect it to be funny, it's tragic; when you expect it to be tragic, it's funny.

The audience should come to the theatre expecting to play a part—We see them as our torturers, as Mussolini's followers. They can't act as if they're watching a TV show. I should perhaps stress that there is a fifteen-minute intermission, because it's not mentioned in the program.

Gateway: How does the modern setting interact with the Boccaccio material? Was this set up to provide an ironic contrast between the periods, to heighten the comedy of one and the brutality of the other?

Jean: As you know, Boccaccio wrote his tales when the plague was sweeping across Europe. (Director Alexander) Hausvater simply transposed the events into a similar situation in the twentieth century. People are needed to laugh when they were pursued by the plague. Somehow, variety and comedy are always needed in bad periods like this.

But I want to stress that Hausvater subtitled *Decameron* "an entertainment," for the simple reason that it is. It's fun to see, fun to experience the magic of it. You should try and get to it.

Gateway: Thank you, I definitely will.



The Decameron
SUB Theatre
Until September 25.

by Candy Fertile

Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a collection of a hundred bawdy tales told by a small group of people hiding out from the plague in fourteenth century Florence.

Hausvater's *Decameron* takes a few of the tales and has them presented by a captive Italian theatre company to amuse the guards in a Nazi concentration camp.

Although there are similarities between a plague-ridden city and a concentration camp, there is a fundamental difference and Hausvater capitalizes on this difference to heighten his portrayal of man's degradation by another man and man's indomitable spirit in the face of all obstacles. If this sounds a little clichéd, it's because it is.

Hausvater is out to shock. He does, but then he's using material that can only be shocking. There's a certain predictability about the whole thing.

The actors are brutalized by their captors and the audience is brutalized by the play. Because of the choice of situation, I don't see any other outcome.

Trying to make someone laugh when the failure to do so results in death is a painful task. It's painful to watch too. The audience is caught in a horrible trap like the prisoners. We are expected to laugh at Boccaccio's humour, but, after all, this is a concentration camp. That fact cannot be ignored. At times the players lift the

audience and transport it to Boccaccio's imagined world of sexual free-for-all and raucous laughter ensues. But the laughter dies down quickly when the filthy striped uniforms, the barbed wire fence, and the blinding stark lights come back into our consciousness.

The desperation of the actors to please their guards is shown initially by their frantic, play-acting. They try so hard, they're at such a heightened pitch that a guard's voice continually breaks in and tells the troupe that they must be more realistic. At times the guards force the actors to leave Boccaccio and to perform sexual acts on each other to gratify the perverse needs of the captors. Forcing friends to commit such acts on each other in public is another way to torment and humiliate the prisoners.

In the second part when the acting does become more realistic, very few chuckles are heard. The players are getting tired; their spirits are in danger of being broken. After a particularly brutalizing scene, they nearly give up but one woman (played wonderfully by France Desjarais) keeps them going. She recounts a tale to give the others time to recover. Fear and desperation and hope are combined in a moving performance.

There is little physical violence in this play; it's all mental and it's extremely wearing. Curiously Hausvater calls his play "comedy with a gun at the head." He's wrong. This is tragedy with a few comic moments. And the irony of the situation increases the tragedy.



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