

ARTS

Theatre on the brink

BY JULIE LUOMA

CAGED IN AN iron curtain, their only remaining mobility to climb the walls. The Romanian characters in Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest* balance on the brink of madness. Traditions die hard in the first in a series of "Theatre of the Mind" at Dalhousie.

THEATRE
Mad Forest
Dalhousie Theatre Productions

In the first act, heavy accents, bleak costumes, scarcity of props, stark lighting and a sense of individual isolation and bitterly raw oppression weigh heavily on the audience. There is more laboured breathing than dialogue as characters keep their anguish contained.

Despite the sparse dialogue, we are intimately involved in the struggles of the two families portrayed before, during and after the December 1989 revolution. The persecutory government tries to keep a lid on their emotions, but the intensity of their lives cannot be stifled. The audience becomes more tense as their need for love, belonging, sex, a sense of purpose, and change becomes more tortuous.



DAL PHOTO: MARIA PATRIQUIN

Too cool to live, too smart to die.

The first act takes us up to the death of the hated Ceausecus. Relating fragments of their experiences, the characters piece the days of the revolution together for the audience. They take us through the fear, the excitement, and sometimes, the shame of not having been in the heat of the battle. The sense of power they have found in the crowd and the image of flowers in gun barrels transfers easily from them to us.

In the second act, with their new-found freedom, the accents

disappear and the dialogue flows freely. So too does an old attitude that keeps these people divided: the prejudice against Hungarians. Their new relationships and politics let them dream, at times reaching out into thin air, but they persist.

Is there no one to blame?

As the Romanians try to refurbish their national psyche, their questions about the revolution remain unanswered. For example, how does one balance the desire to take part in the revolution against putting family at risk? Why did they tolerate the totalitarian regime? Is there no one to blame? Ultimately, each character struggles alone, lashing out (literally, in one scene) at the others.

This bare bones production is two hours and 45 minutes long. In places, it wears thin. At times, it feels long. But Patrick Christopher's images complement Churchill's writing. Irony is in the spotlight in scenes like: the rat in the corner, the upsidedown grandmother, the demonic angel, the rocking orphan, the wedding circle. The hilarious scene between the vampire and the dog casts the vampire as the state and the dog as the civilian to illustrate the tradeoff between belonging and losing one's life blood.

In *Mad Forest* humour and pain highlight our glimpses of Romanian life as it disintegrates in search of a breakthrough. Rebuilding out of chaos is a daunting task, but the tradition of determination also dies hard.



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