

THEATRE – March 1, 2007

White-hot epic is a tour de force

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE

Scorched

Directed by Richard Rose

Written by Wajdi Mouawad

Starring Sergio Di Zio, Kelli Fox, Sophie Goulet

At the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto

Rating: ***½

In the unnamed Middle Eastern country where *Scorched* is set, there are "signs of hatred at every corner." There's no love, no poetry, no beauty, no values. Newborns are taken away from their mothers and drowned in rivers more readily than kittens. Most harrowing of all, snipers know the lyrics to *The Logical Song* by Supertramp and aren't afraid to do an air-guitar routine to them. Truly, it's a land where gods fear to tread and monsters roam free.

How Montreal playwright Wajdi Mouawad creates such a beautiful, compassionate, lyrical and ultimately reconciliatory piece of theatre without sacrificing the outside horror or the rage within is something that deserves your time and demands some perseverance. *Scorched* opened Tuesday at the Tarragon Theatre in a provocative co-production with Ottawa's National Arts Centre.

It's by no means a polished piece of writing in the traditional, consummate sense. It features lines such as "Let me hear her silence" and "I searched for you amidst a flock of birds" that are too French, cringe-worthy, or both. Many of its scenes drag on for a few minutes beyond what is absolutely necessary and its language is unabashedly repetitive in Linda Gaboriau's otherwise performance-friendly and tri-culturally sensitive (French, English and Arabic) translation. But wait, there's more.

Director Richard Rose's work is an act of translation and mediation between cultures and artistic sensibilities. Always a director with an attuned ear and clear vision for the physicality of theatre, Rose gives *Scorched* the fluidity and expansiveness it needs onstage. This is live theatre so tight, so seamless, it feels like it's been edited digitally. (I mean that as a compliment.) His attention to detail is so bloody impressive that when a cast member, in the heat of a passionate argument, scribbles a line in the sand-filled set of

Graeme S. Thomson, she does it from right to left -- as in all Arabic script. Later, two women go on to sing a note-perfect couplet from a famous anthem by Egyptian diva Oum Kalthoum about freedom and the end of captivity that, to native speakers at least, will come as a jolt. FYI: This is not a multicultural cast but a largely Caucasian one. (Again, I mean that as a compliment. Sort of.) Rose also knows that we in English theatre are not about to go easy on our demands for emotionally rooted performances from the bevy of fine actors onstage. Hell, no. We want psychological realism even in a non-linear piece of theatre. He gives it to us, without changing the essence of the work.

Above all, Rose is faithful to the demands of Mouawad's story, a mixture of Greek tragedy and contemporary travesty. It begins in the office of a malapropism-prone public notary (Alon Nashman in fine, fine comic form). A brother and sister (Sergio Di Zio in a coming-of-age performance and a heartbreaking Sophie Goulet) have gathered for the reading of their mother's will.

Nawal, the mother, has lived a silent existence in Montreal after fleeing a civil war in her home country. She has left her children a suitably riddle-like will. Their task is to find the father they thought was dead and a brother they never knew they had.

What follows are journeys in the physical and theatrical sense: journeys into the past lives of Nawal and her war-ravaged country. Played at different ages by a charming Janick Hébert, a powerful Kelli Fox and a stoic Nicola Lipman, Nawal guides us in and out of the logic-defying world that is the Middle East. She is not the only one "scorched" by it -- a word and an experience for those to whom "tainted" just doesn't cut it. When the shocking final revelation comes, the verbal and physical excesses at play throughout seem like an understatement by comparison. It's a *coup de théâtre* that few playwrights have the skill and chutzpah to pull off so convincingly and harrowingly.

While there are some similarities here to *Tideline*, Mouawad's most celebrated and last produced play in Toronto, *Scorched* is the superior work. Both are epic in scope and frantic in pace, but this one is a simpler, quieter family story. Politics are the play's context, poetry its tools but redemption is its one-and-only object.

It's not an accident that *Scorched* ends with a burial scene and a rain storm. The former implores us to let go of the past while still honouring it. The rain falls like a hard, cold shower and a wakeup call lest it should happen again.

Scorched runs at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre until March 31 (416-531-1827).