

Pain scented with poetry

February 28, 2007

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THEATRE CRITIC

Scorched

★★★★(out of 4)

By Wajdi Mouawad. Translated by Linda Gaboriau. Directed by Richard Rose.
Until March 31 at Tarragon Theatre, 30 Bridgman Ave. **416-531-1827**

There is a moment late in the first act of Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*, which had its English language premiere at the Tarragon Theatre last night, that is as thrilling as anything you are likely to see on a Toronto stage this year.

Two women are running in ever-increasing circles across Graeme S. Thomson's sand-filled set. One of them is very young and is in pursuit of the son taken away from her at birth. The other is the same woman's daughter, roughly 50 years later, racing to find out the truth about her mother's life.

Their respective circles never meet but grow in velocity until a sudden horrible burst of violence literally stops both of them in their tracks.

Once they pause, you're likely to find your heart is beating more rapidly than before, because you have become part of their respective journeys.

Scorched is one of the most complex, ambitious plays we have seen in recent years, bursting with emotion and ideas, but also written in language capable of staggering poetic images. Mouawad was born in Lebanon, raised in France and now lives in Montreal; all three threads of his heritage are visible in the way he writes.

A woman of undefined Middle Eastern origins has died in Canada. As part of their legacy, her twin children are presented with letters that they are to give to their father and their older brother, both of whom supposedly still live in their mother's homeland.

Reluctantly at first, but finally with great feeling, they set out on their quest. What they discover along the way evokes almost every possible feeling – from terror and pity to an ultimate series of revelations that rival anything in Sophocles.

It would have been so easy in the wrong hands for this story to have become impossible: a collection of retrospective grief and pain that would have bored us all to tears.

But not here. Mouawad knows when to lighten the load with broad comedy, when to scent the air with poetry that lingers long afterwards, and when to use the inevitable building blocks of good dramatic structure to create a towering edifice of pain everyone must climb.

And Richard Rose has matched his author with a production that absolutely courses with energy and invention. Mouawad frequently demands that three separate periods in time exist simultaneously on the stage and Rose finds a way to make it all happen.

He's aided and abetted by one of the most gripping casts I've seen in recent memory; The leading role of Nawal (the mother whose will starts the saga) is

played by three actresses: Janick Hébert is fragile yet strong as the youngest incarnation; Kelli Fox blazes with superb righteous anger as the middle-aged revolutionary and Nicola Lipman is absolutely shattering as the old woman, forced to face all the horrible ghosts in her life.

There's also superb work from Sergio Di Zio and Sophie Goulet as the questing children: he as a rampantly emotional boxer and she as a seemingly cold mathematician. Valerie Buhagiar, Alex Poch-Goldin and David Fox are all magnificent in a variety of drastically differing roles.

But if you had to single out one person in the evening, it would be Alon Nashman as Alphonse, the well-meaning but ineffectual notary public who administers Nawal's will.

Mouawad seems to know that a story this tragic needs someone to lighten the mood and he has conceived Nashman's character as a positive cascade of non-stop malapropisms. (My favourite? "You're stuck between the devil and the Blue Danube.")

Anyone who knows Nashman's work will not be surprised to discover that he is more than hysterically funny. He also dispenses a profound humanism needed to redeem this potentially bleak story.

Scorched has much to say about pointless religious wars, the way we live our lives and the necessity of hope. But Mouawad is not merely a messenger; he is a true playwright, who knows how to fill a stage with awe and wonder.

This is one you have to see.