



Arts: October 30, 2009

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/review?oid=oid%3A901610>

Arts Review

By Barry Pineo

Murder Ballad Murder Mystery

The Vortex, through Nov. 7

Running time: 2 hr

The older I get, the more I seem to enjoy plays and films that have no obvious linear, narrative plot. When I first saw Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York*, I thought it was the finest, deepest, greatest film I had seen in many years, so I was surprised to read reviews that excoriated it for its shallowness and its indulgence. It only goes to show, there really is no accounting for taste.

I have a feeling that some might react to this Vortex Repertory-Tutto Theatre Company co-production of Elizabeth Doss' original musical with similar confusion and, perhaps, even derision. But I can't recall seeing many Austin theatre productions in the last 20 or so years so seamlessly perfect as this one. I'm tempted to give most of the credit to director Dustin Wills, but I hesitate to do so. While certainly Wills was the guiding hand, every element of the production contributes mightily to its overall effect.

Take Doss' original script, which seems set in some unnamed part of Appalachia. Its focus is death, and it's filled with it. Sister kills sister, father kills daughter, mother kills father, strangers kill strangers, and that's just the first act. But rather than stirring horror and revulsion, the deaths are perversely loving or revoltingly comic, and all are set to music. Two of the songs particularly stand out: Content Love Knowles stops the show in the first act with her rendition of "You Got What You Deserved," and Mark Stewart, accompanying himself on guitar, fascinates in the second act with the strange ballad "The Night I Didn't Kill You."

Or look at set designer Lisa Laratta's transformation of the Vortex space, which I've never seen used more effectively. Ramps and platforms span the walls. Actors splash through a pool of water center stage. Rope and spookily glowing lanterns hang suspended from the ceiling, and shanks of rope adorn the walls. Actors crawl onto the stage, slide onto it, scamper up and down ladders, and are hoisted to the roof. And the background for all of this – well, I just don't want to give this delightful surprise away. If you want to know what major scenic element dominates the stage, you'll just have to see it for yourself.

Or consider Mark Stewart and Andy Tindall's original, evocative bluegrass music, which accompanies most of the action, played by a band of four on banjo, guitar, mandolin, and fiddle. And while, for me, Robert Pierson's growling father Tom and Hilah Johnson's detached and weary Agatha stand out, the entire ensemble of actors commits completely and utterly to this broad, bizarre vision of a backwoods community gone completely and utterly mad.

In writing all this, I don't want to imply that the production is transcendent. Nothing is, really. Even I found it self-indulgently ridiculous when Caden Cotard used a dropper to put fake tears in his eyes in *Synecdoche, New York*. But that moment was the exception that proves the rule: In order to achieve greatness, great risk must be undertaken, and you'll be hard-pressed to find a riskier production in Austin this year than this strange string of ballads and mysteries, best summed up in the final lines of the final song of the show: "How lucky to be dead. How lucky to be singing ... tonight."

Copyright © 2010 Austin Chronicle Corporation. All rights reserved.