



Dual performances diminish a well-crafted 'No Exit' at UAF

It may take two to tango, but three is the ideal number in theater if you really want to ratchet up tension. For proof, check out the University of Alaska Fairbanks' production of "No Exit," Jean Paul Sartre's vision of hell.

Garcin is attracted to Inez, but Inez wants Estelle. Alas, Estelle only has eyes for Garcin. Around and around the three characters go, alternately wooing and sniping at each other as they pursue unattainable desire.

Beyond the grand existential ideas, it is the play's formal elegance that ranks it as a classic, and Theatre UAF's production both honors Sartre's dramatic economy and plays against it.

Director Ben Coffroth deftly moves the players back and forth in their skirmishes like boxers in a three-way match. The simple set heightens this impression, consisting as it largely does of a three-armed platform with a chair at each point. From these corners Garcin, Inez and Estelle



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either wade out or retreat, cluster or scatter over the course of the play. But the blocking never seems contrived.

Credit for this must also go to the actors, who all turn in controlled but powerful performances. Craig Brookes as Garcin, Anna Gagne-Hawes as Estelle, and Jenny Schlotfeldt as Inez work off each other wonderfully. Yet they each serve up palpable individual portraits of tortured psyches without resorting to histrionics.

Another strong performance is turned in by Michael Shaeffer as the Valet who ushers the

three main characters into their infernal arena. Shaeffer's physicality and delivery, however, are intentionally stylized and awkward. It is as if he is only imperfectly adopting human speech and movements. His costume and white makeup also suggest he dwells in another reality from the play's other characters.

Here is where director Coffroth's conception of "No Exit" begins to veer sharply away from the simple and direct into the grotesquely baroque. He has married Sartre's tightly focused play with Butoh, a dance form I've never encountered before and whose merits I'm not competent to judge. For the record, the dancers are Adam Gillette, Rhianna Johnson, Jasmine Johnson, Fiona Lungquist, Hadassah Nelson, Carey Seward and Molly Wilson.

Patrons are offered the opportunity to see either the play or the dance, but since the play takes place on the Salisbury Theatre's main stage and the "Huis Clos Performers" shift, slither, shuffle and writhe further back on the adjacent Lab Theatre stage, both audiences can see both presentations.

It is not quite as confusing as it sounds. Kade Mendelowitz's lighting helps minimize the distractions, and Matthew Krell's haunting sound design meshes well with both productions. That said, the dancers in elaborate costumes, white makeup and arresting hairstyles manage to steal focus from the actors downstage of them, and that's where I had some problems with the production.

"No Exit" is definitely in the "pressure cooker" school of drama. The play's force derives from the audience experiencing the increasing emotional stress applied to the characters and seeing how they react. By presenting a companion dance performance to "No Exit," Coffroth essentially deflates that pressure for audience members. When the going gets tough our attention goes to the dancers.

No one has ever accused Theatre UAF of not taking chances. And even though Coffroth's concept didn't work for me emotionally, he provided plenty of food for thought and arresting images. Patrons will be recalling and discussing this production long after lighter, more accessible plays have faded from memory.



Kade Mendelowitz / University of Alaska Fairbanks