

BACK STAGE™

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Photograph 51

By Jennie Webb



Photo by: Zoo District

It's a fascinating study, an evening composed of a veteran playwright's works that are at the same time closely linked and worlds apart. And it's a provocative choice, putting two of Murray Mednick's new, full-length plays in the hands of artists from different companies, with different sensibilities that attack the material from different directions. While the results are, naturally, very different, both offer an interesting and original perspective to the material. Yet neither manages to make these intensely personal plays reach out to the audience on a personal level.

The laudable Zoo District presents Mednick's *The Destruction of the Fourth World*, essentially a dysfunctional family drama, albeit wrapped in a stylized end-times package, replete with themes of the Jewish faith, identity, politics, and the Holocaust. It's a scary world in the not-too-distant future, and Caleb (Michael Shamus Wiles) is struggling to push his teenage son Bernie (Mike Lion) out into that world, meanwhile having difficulties navigating it himself, particularly after the suicide of his wife, Sarah (Yvette Wulff). Directors Kristi Schultz and Brian Frette helm this expansive, freewheeling staging, which nicely integrates the other realm occupied by the capricious Coyote (Kelly Van Kirk), Bernie's Hopi spirit guide, as well as Sarah and that of the

wonderfully wacko family matriarch Rosie (Laura James). It's a bit more difficult for us to tap into the interplay between Caleb's elder son (Scott Victor Nelson) and daughter-in-law (Kim Fitzgerald). Ultimately, we have a hard time connecting the disconnect of this extended family -- and everything else that's been thrown at us within the play -- to what we're supposed to be left with after *The Destruction* is over.

Padua Playwrights' presentation of *Clown Show for Bruno*, on the other hand, is an almost tidy three-hander. Director Guy Zimmerman knows Mednick's material intimately and does a fabulous job guiding this off-kilter vaudevillian exercise. Full of spectacular images and the very precise work of actors Daniel Stein, Bill Celentano, and Kali Quinn (alternating with Dana Wieluns), the clown show weaves itself around the fate of Jewish writer and artist Bruno Schulz, killed during the Nazi occupation of Poland. The masterful Stein is the central character of this tweaked narrative, and we couldn't ask for better company in verbal and physical wit than Celentano and Quinn, each wonderfully versatile.

The design elements are also right on target here: set by Matt Aston, Dan Reed's lighting, sound by John Zalewski, Gwendolyn Stukely's costumes, and masks by Jeffrey Atherton. However, the tight and attractive presentation feels overburdened by the material. If at first we eagerly follow its twists and turns, we're soon lagging behind -- and, in the end, just tired.

Presented by Padua Playwrights at Art Share L.A., 801 E. Fourth Place, L.A. March 26–April 19. Repertory schedule. (213) 625-1766. Padua Playwrights.