

Review: 'New Works by Murray Mednick' at Art Share L.A.

6:30 PM, April 2, 2009

Playwright Murray Mednick is a veteran innovator who, some 30-plus years into his career, remains dedicated to shaking up the theatrical format. Much of Mednick's work ("Joe and Betty," "Mrs. Feuerstein") tries to bridge the chasm between savagery and creativity -- Beethoven and Nazism. That preoccupation, in recent years, has led Mednick into a pointed exploration of the Jewish identity, the existential angst of a people who have often tumbled into the gap between civilization and barbarism.

Those themes are very much at the forefront of "New Works by Murray Mednick" at downtown's [Art Share L.A.](#) Produced by Padua Playwrights, the experimental theater group founded by Mednick over 30 years ago, "The Destruction of the 4th World" and "Clown Show for Bruno" are vastly dissimilar works linked by common calamity — in one case cosmic, in the other harrowingly individual. (The series also includes "Girl on a Bed," the filmed adaptation of an earlier Mednick work.)

"World" centers, characteristically, around a dysfunctional family. Adolescent agoraphobe Bernie (gifted Mike Lion) is prepping for the apocalypse with the help of Coyote (Kelly Van Kirk) -- tellingly, the same sage Hopi trickster featured in Mednick's late '70s play series, "The Coyote Cycle."

Bernie's relatives are all troubled seekers. Bernie's father Caleb (Michael Shamus Wiles) can't decide if his son is a visionary or a lunatic. Bernie's brother David (Scott Victor Nelson) struggles to reconcile his Jewish faith with his atheistic doubts. David's convert wife Chrystal (Kim Fitzgerald) refuses to reproduce in such uncertain times. Bernie's grandma Rosie (feisty, fine Laura James), a senile Holocaust survivor, believes she is currently living in Brazil. Meanwhile, Bernie's dead mother Sarah (danced by Yvette Wulff) wafts through the action as yet another indication that the tattered veil between the living and the dead is about to rip asunder.

Buoyed by innovative design elements, in particular Dan Reed's lighting, directors Kristi Schultz and Brian Fretté make elementary mistakes in their occasionally self-conscious staging but wisely stress the piece's playfulness. Still, there's a lot of information here, arguably too much. The characters' circular conversations sound like the musings of Talmudic scholars trapped in a Sartrean hell. Although frustratingly discursive, "World" bristles with raw urgency, as if Mednick had tried to get all his unresolved questions down on paper before the atomic clock reached midnight.

By contrast, "Clown Show for Bruno" initially plays like pure burlesque. In the play, three mime/clowns, Emilio (Daniel A. Stein), Jacko (Bill Celentano) and Cleo (Kali Quinn, alternating with Dana Wieluns), reenact the true story of Bruno Schulz, a Polish writer and artist killed by the Nazis. In Guy Zimmerman's perfectly syncopated staging, the gifted performers cavort like commedia players at a street festival. But the mood soon shifts from the frantic to the funereal. It's a cunning setup intended to take us off guard and make us experience the horror afresh. It works.

-- F. Kathleen Foley

"New Works by Murray Mednick." [Art Share L.A.](#), 801 East 4th Place, Los Angeles. "The Destruction of the 4th World," 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays, 5 p.m. Saturdays. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes. "Clown Show for Bruno," 8 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes. Series ends April 19. (213) 625-1766. www.paduaplaywrights.net

Photo: Kali Quinn, left, Bill Celentano and Daniel A. Stein in "Clown Show for Bruno." Credit: Stacey Bode.