

Tango

A Hit at the Detroit Rep

Thomas Haroldson

The Detroit Repertory Theater's current offering, *Tango*, is the most enjoyable play to appear in town since "MacBird."

The director, Bruce Milian, like a good alchemist, has managed to transform broad farce, heavy social thought, and straight professional theatre into a first-rate production.

Tango is such a funny play that it is easy to overlook the fact that its humor is based on a very serious, and perhaps even a very frightening theme.

The playwright, Slawomir Mrozek, like many European writers, has little faith in the so-called "progress" of modern thought. Mrozek holds the fatalistic view that intellectual history moves through cycles of action and reaction, but that in the end brute force always prevails over reason.

In many ways *Tango* is a dramatization of the ideas found in Yeats' poem "The Second Coming." In one act "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." In act two "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." In the last act a rough beast "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."

Admittedly, all this sounds pretty heavy for a farce, and not very funny, but the main achievement of the play is that it remains on the surface thoroughly humorous, while remaining in depth thoroughly meaningful.

"Tango" features an allegorical family that bears a striking resemblance to some of the families in the "screwball" comedies of the Thirties. At first glance, everyone, including the butler, appears to be completely yet pleasantly insane. But it soon becomes obvious that their madness has a sound historical base.

The mother and father represent the art-for-art's-sake era of Isadora Duncan and the Dadists when "Change" was the order of the day. They stand for the past were supposedly destroyed—Isadora posed in the nude, Zelda Fitzgerald smoked in public, and a few straight people even had enough nerve to dance the tango.

The play attempts to deal with the question of what happens to such people when they grow old and are confronted with a new generation of rebels. It's very much like asking today how the children of Paul Krassner and Jerry Rubin will behave when they grow up.

In other words, if we are to accept youthful rebellion as an absolute condition of human existence, then we must accept the fact that our offspring will eventually attempt to refute everything we stand for.

Most of us would like to believe that each generation can be brought into the Humanist fold, but the author of *Tango* holds out no such hope.

In addition, he suggests that ideological warfare is, after all, only a tempest in a teapot that can be easily resolved by the application of a mindless physical force. For example, at the end of the play the troublesome young intellectual is finally silenced by the butler who simply beats him to death with his bare hands.

Many people, despite the explicit theme, come away asking what *Tango* is all about.

This is understandable. The humor is so rich, and the action so sustained, that one is really not encouraged to think about the play while watching it. But perhaps this is the best part of modern drama—the initial injection of meaning is painless, but it firmly takes hold after a day or two.

The members of the cast, although fairly young, represent some of the best and most experienced actors in Detroit. The inner city has only a handful of veteran “Off Broadway” performers, but fortunately most of them are in “Tango.”

Council Cargle, who appeared in “MacBird,” has the jaw-breaking task of portraying Arthur, the talkative young rebel.

Cargle manages fairly well to prevent the priggish shallowness of the character to influence his performance, but at times it's unavoidable. It's the age-old problem of attempting to portray artificiality without becoming artificial in the process.

Gunnar Lewis, who directed the critically acclaimed “Tiger” on Plum Street, appears in the role of Stornil, the old Dadaist. Lewis uses theatrical experience, sharp timing and a natural talent for comedy to develop Stornil into the most fully realized character in the play.

William Boswell, as Uncle Eugene, plays the part of a doddering old man with conviction—always a difficult task for a young actor. Beverly Markowitz, Barbara Busby and Eric Saunders also give thoroughly professional performances.

However, Edwina Lewis' portrayal of Ala is relatively weak. Miss Lewis, a 17-year-old novice, simply lacks the experience to keep up with the rest of the cast, and often her stage mannerisms put a considerable strain on the play.

About the only other thing that might make *Tango* even better than it is, would be a close editing of the script. Many of the speeches are a few lines too long, and some scenes need to be tightened up. For example, the extended scene in which Cargle and Miss Lewis are left alone on the stage tends to slow the play down to a walk.

But, on the whole, *Tango* is an excellent production that should be seen by everyone in town. Detroit Repertory Theatre needs us, and we need the theatre.

As Bruce Milian says in the program: The theatre gets inside and outside of things so that we can better understand the thing itself.”

Help support local theater. Go see *Tango*. Tell ‘em Jay Carr sent you.

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