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EDITORIAL

Arts & Entertainment • March 22, 2007

Giving Good Headline

Two local theater productions explore painful and timely local issues.



by [Scott Renshaw](#)

A parent mourns the tragic death of her child at the hands of a disturbed man. The Utah Legislature contemplates restrictions on school clubs supporting gay and lesbian youth. The stories have been local newspapers' front-page fodder for the last month—and, in a case of freakish coincidence, they're also the stuff of two current local theater productions at the Rose Wagner Center.

Hard on the heels of the Trolley Square shooting tragedy comes Pygmalion Productions' staging of Bryony Lavery's *Frozen*, about the intersection between a psychiatrist, her serial-killer research subject and the mother

of one of his victims. And in the wake of the state's latest regurgitation of anti-gay club legislation comes Plan-B Theatre Company's 10-year anniversary production of Tobin Atkinson's *The Alienation Effekt*. While the latter more obviously is inspired by local events, both works could have viewers wrestling with gut responses than initially might have seemed obvious.

Set largely in England, *Frozen* casts Kathryn Atwood as Nancy Shirley, a middle-class mother of two whose youngest daughter Rona heads off to her grandmother's house one afternoon and never arrives. Years later, Nancy learns Rona was one of the many victims of Ralph (David Spencer), a pedophile serial killer and one of the many subjects of a study by American psychiatrist Agnetha Gottmundsdottir (Brenda Sue Cowley), who's struggling with her own grief. Nancy wants closure through a meeting with Ralph—which Agnetha feels is a terrible idea.

At times, ineffective production elements threaten to hinder the story's impact. While Atwood does a fine job with her English accent in a touching performance, Spencer struggles with something that sounds like an auditory tour of the British Isles—Cockney here, Midlands there, BBC announcer a moment later. Brad Henrie's set includes so many different elements in so many different locations that it's genuinely distracting, including suspended chunks of fencing that obstruct the view of a projection screen at the rear of the stage. And the blocking and lighting sporadically place characters in half-shadow—which, even if thematically intended by director Fran Pruyn, makes it hard to, you know, *see* stuff.

But the production somehow recovers as it questions how we define evil when mental illness is involved. From Agnetha's compelling speeches, the idea culminates in the shattering one-on-one between Nancy and Ralph. And, in a scene that requires no accent, Spencer remarkably conveys physically the agony of a man feeling guilt and human compassion perhaps for the first time. It's ultimately a potent exploration of who “deserves” forgiveness—and who deserve to forgive themselves.

The Alienation Effekt similarly takes the audience to a place where they might think they already know how to react to the “villains.” In the 1980-set first act, freshman Utah Sen. Heber Vigil (Mark Fossen) fails to get his school prayer legislation past the Democratic-controlled Congress. But an opportunity for political salvation arrives when he champions an “equal access” bill allowing Bible-study groups access to school buildings. Sixteen years later, that bill comes back to bite now-Gov. Vigil when students at one Utah high school want to form a gay-straight club—and Vigil's own daughter Jeannie (Colleen Lewis) would be one of the charter members.

Atkinson's play takes its title from the theatrically distancing philosophy of playwright Bertolt Brecht, and all the members of the eight-person ensemble start the show wearing stylized whiteface makeup in the middle of a stark, grey set. Musical numbers often employ spirituals or vintage standards like “Camptown Ladies,” lending an aura of timelessness to the events. As the actors cross gender lines to play several roles each, these characters can simply serve as generalized representations of players in cultural dramas: the heartless, bigoted Republican politician; the strident liberal; the pontificating preacher.

But as the second act progresses—and the actors gradually remove bits and pieces of their makeup—the world of *The Alienation Effekt* proves far more complex than one of broad satire. Fossen wonderfully plays Vigil's goals as utterly sincere and the violation of his own principles to achieve those goals as a genuine tragedy. The American Civil Liberties Union executive (Stephanie Howell) turns her fight against the gay-club ban into a personal vendetta against Vigil, oblivious to whether Jeannie is turned into human collateral as a result. Atkinson—the Plan-B co-founder who has returned to town to direct this production—subtly and powerfully shows what happens when opponents in a political fight turn the “other” into something faceless and inhuman. And, despite the reactions of an audience that seemed far too easily inclined to hoot at only one side in this

debate, Atkinson doesn't play obvious favorites.

Then again, challenging our own simplistic preconceptions isn't easy. That, ideally, is what good art can do for us: dig beneath the hard cold facts of a newspaper headline to expose the pulsing, messy things that lurk there.

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