

Theater Review

'Slaughter City' a bloody good play

Time travel and gender bending feature in Naomi Wallace's unusual 1996 play "Slaughter City," which opened Thursday at the Nitery as part of Stanford Repertory Theater's summer theater series.



John Angell Grant

On the surface this play is about labor problems in the animal slaughtering industry, but it wanders like a dream into other areas. Sex and romance are recurring problems. Structurally, it is a collage of dozens of short scenes, many of them filled with gore.

Playwright Wallace is best known for her award-winning 17th century London plague drama "One Flea Spare," which is about four people forced into quarantine together, and behaving badly.

Soul-destroying work

The current Stanford play has similarities. Four workers in a commercial slaughterhouse are trapped in jobs where they hack up animal carcasses while soaked in blood. It is soul-destroying assembly line work.

The Stanford production is well cast and well performed. Eight actors sit in chairs at the side of the stage and step forward as their scenes are called for. Four of them play slaughterhouse workers dressed in bloody smocks.



LEONTYNE MBELE-MBONG (Roach, right) clutches Louis McWilliams (Brandon) in Stanford Repertory Theater's production of Naomi Wallace's "Slaughter City" at the Nitery. Photograph by Frank Chen.

One is a college guy (Louis McWilliams) who offers instruction on how to cut quickly and efficiently through a carcass. When he hits romantically on an African-American co-worker (Leontyne Mbele-Mbong), he explains how a boss sewed his mouth together, and he can still taste the blood.

When an unpopular strikebreaker (Fiona Maguire) shows up, just as the workers are negotiating their union contract, she appears to be a time traveler who has journeyed through various labor disputes in American history, sometimes as a scab and sometimes as a union organizer.

A co-worker (Nora Tjossem) becomes obsessed with the strikebreaker, and the two hold a mock wedding.

Hoping to fend off unionization, company managers (Thomas Freeland and Dorian Lockett) host an aerobics class for their blood-soaked factory employees. It's a nutty play.

Good direction

Director Alex Johnson has deftly orchestrated a quickly moving bare-stage, black-box production, using only rolling hanger racks to define space in various ways. Holly Slang's sound design includes eerie metallic

music during the many fast scene changes.

"Slaughter City" is a disjointed, expressionistic, Brechtian play. A racial subtext runs through the story, as well as a fluid gender subtext. It seems to correlate failed corporate capitalism with failed romantic relationships. It's a call to human history to shift intentions on a deep level.

Themes echo recent news

A number of themes in the play resonate with the politics of recent weeks, including women who are asked by mentors for sexual favors (reminiscent of the Roger Ailes Fox News story), and confusion about which restroom is available to a person with gender vagueness.

Other themes include union tension and sexual role-playing games.

"Slaughter City's" weakness is that there is no hard storyline. It is more a character-and-themes play than a story play. But it is an unusual and intriguing work that you are not likely to see elsewhere, and Stanford Rep has staged a very good production.

Please note: "Slaughter City" contains nudity, adult language and references to sexual trauma. For tickets and information visit stanfordreptheater.com.

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