

Tiger burning bright

Peppermint Creek season opener presents humans as animals with better infrastructure

By Mary Cusack

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In Rajiv Joseph's play, "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo," Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s 12th season opener, war isn't hell — it's more like purgatory.

Set during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, "Bengal Tiger" is a complex creation that encompasses themes about the nature of man, the motivations behind cruelty and kindness and the difference between duty and responsibility. And all of these ideas are brought forth by the musings of a tiger, perhaps as a reminder that humans are simply animals with better infrastructure.

The play opens with jarheads Kev (Andrew Bailiff) and Tom (Michael Banghart) guarding one of the last animals left alive at the Baghdad Zoo, a tiger (Jeff Boerger). Their bored bravado leads to catastrophe, leaving the cat to haunt the streets of Baghdad, searching for the meaning of life and the passage to the afterlife.

The tiger, however, isn't the only ghost on the prowl, nor is he even the most interesting. The paths of the show's characters start to intersect and, aligning with Peppermint Creek's seasonal theme, "Defining Revelation," each disclosure is more devastating than the last.

The script can seem overwhelming at first, with its left-right combination of fantastical premise and real-world situational violence. And like many retrospective works based on the Iraq War, it does not cast a positive light on the impact of our shock and awe campaign on the average Iraqi citizen.

One of most unsettling surprises relates to Musa (Brennan Hattaway), a seemingly affable and earnest translator for the Marines. He is haunted by the ghost of Uday Hussein, played with guts by Todd Heywood, channeling the depths of Hussein's depravity. Heywood is unrecognizable in the role, boldly infusing Hussein, the son of Saddam Hussein, with eerie charisma, slick with a sheen of narcissism. Even in the afterlife Hussein takes glee in provoking others toward evil rather than searching for meaning and redemption, as do his ghostly cohorts.

Bailiff and Banghart are terrific as their characters transform between booyah bullies into sympathetic victims of their choices. Both roles offer tremendous opportunities to mine the depths of violence and tragedy, and both actors dig deep to find the intensity required to sell these roles with painful authenticity.

The pacing of the play is inhibited somewhat by necessary but frequent scene changes. Despite the simplicity of the props, the open venue of the Miller Performing Arts Center makes it difficult to mask the actions of stage crew, which can take the viewer out of the environment of the work.

It may be unpleasant to watch, but "Bengal Tiger" is an important piece of theater to experience. As with "12 Years a Slave" or "The Passion of the Christ," it exposes the depths of human depravity, with the hope that maybe audiences will be horrified enough to say "never again."

"Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo"

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 25-Saturday, Sept. 27; 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 28 \$16/\$11 students & seniors Miller Performing Arts Center 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing (517) 372-0945, peppermintcreek.org