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July 27, 2011 / Q Guide: Arts & Entertainment

A harrowing, surreal tale of love and youth 'For Rent'

By Arlene McKanic

"For Rent," Ozen Yula's experimental play enjoying a brief run at the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center, premiered in one of the most dramatic, sudden rainstorms of the summer. By the time the reviewer struggled the couple of blocks from the No. 7 subway to LaGuardia Community College she was soaked to the bone, and the theater's otherwise welcome air conditioning left her shivering. But this interesting, disturbing surrealistic work did manage to punch through the soggy discomfort.

"For Rent," translated from Turkish by Les Hunter, takes place in a park — maybe even a park of the mind — where a bunch of kids come to find a sort of salvation. What they find, at first, are lives of prostitution and degradation. It will be up to the audience to determine whether any or all of them find salvation or not.

The play's title works on several levels. "For Rent" not only describes the bodies of the kids, as their customers pay them for sex, but the earth itself. "We shall leave so new tenants can come," says Simay, the lone girl in the play. Often, the audience isn't certain whether the characters are alive, or dead, or in some in-between bardo.

Ably directed by Handan Ozbilgin, the play takes place with audience members seated on stage, left and right, and the actors performing mostly on park benches at the front and back of the stage. This not only means that the number of theatergoers is limited — one should get to the LPAC theater early — but that the action has an intensity otherwise absent if one was conventionally seated in the auditorium.

The actors are excellent. Bridgit Francesca Giuffrida's Simay, though a prostitute like the men in the play, projects a childlike innocence, wonder and capacity for love even as ghastly things are happening around — or being caused by — her. Giuffrida also aces a long, and thoughtful soliloquy. Her love interest is the doomed Adnan, played by Michael Anthony Munoz with almost, but not quite, the innocence Giuffrida brings to her character.

Nelson Patino's Korhan begins as another naïf, till near the end of the play we see, to our sorrow, that he's given over to the life of hustling. Brian Shaw makes his Oruc seem genial and harmless, until he's not, and Fernando Torres is brilliant as the voluble Ferhan, who tries to show Korhan the ropes and perhaps become his pimp. Steven Hitt is Sadik, the oldest of the group and a sort of head pimp of the park. Possibly a sociopath, he exudes menace and the threat of violence, and when what happens to him happens, you can't help but think it's justice even as you're horrified.

Powerful and unsettling, "For Rent" played a limited run at LPAC last weekend but speaks to the quality and diversity of performances at the theater. It was supported by a grant by the Moon and Stars Project and the American Turkish Society.

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