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# Woyzeck

nytheatre.com review by Mary Beth Smith

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It seems like every theater history class is required to read Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which is often credited with the beginning of "modern theater," and most students walk away significantly more confused than enlightened. *Woyzeck* is the first play to introduce a new structure, primarily a non-linear style. It is also the first play to focus on what many call an "irrational antihero" within the disjointed framework of the play. The play is made increasingly difficult because Büchner died before finishing it; nor were the original scenes written to be performed in any particular order. What intrigues many directors as well as script editors is the ability to re-arrange the scenes in any way they deem fit, ensuring that every production of *Woyzeck* will be entirely different from one show to the next.

Over the years, I have read six different editions (for various classes) of *Woyzeck* and continue to be confused as to what this play is truly about. When I saw that someone in the city was producing it, my initial thought was that I would finally, after years of studying it, figure it out. Aporia Theater's production of *Woyzeck* beautifully tackles the play's inherent problems and strings together a story that fully captures the effects of one man's psychological breakdown.

Translated and directed by Sarah Wansley, the show opens with one of the major climatic scenes of the play and then immediately shifts back in time before *Woyzeck* has completely deteriorated, giving the audience a reference point to where the play is heading. For a play that has zero structure in its original form, this choice gives the audience an entry into the play and allows us to create the story as we move through the different events leading back to the climax of the show.

While the structure of *Woyzeck* is a major challenge for any production, another is creating a distinctly German play written in 1836 that is relevant to a contemporary American audience. What is refreshing about this production is that it does not try to hide the culture that this play was born in, but rather embraces it in order to enhance the story. Building in German music, using minimal but distinguishable 19th century costumes along with a sparse set, this production creates a snapshot of the rural setting in which the play exists.

The small cast of ten does a superb job portraying as many as 16 different characters throughout the show. While the company works well as an ensemble, there are two specific actors that stand out. The actor who plays *Woyzeck*, Grant Harrison, is able to carry the play beyond that of the typical protagonist. He works *Woyzeck*'s psychological break down slowly, allowing it to build to a point that suddenly spirals out of control. The character work is such that the audience feels a sense of sympathy for a character they know will soon commit heinous acts against the person he supposedly loves most. The other standout

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actor is Rosa Gilmore. Credited only as the “Fool,” she seamlessly moves from one scene to the next as an overall storyteller for the community in which *Woyzeck* exists. Armed with a talent for the violin she takes on a narrator type role, while musically underscoring the action of the play. The director uses Gilmore’s acting ability in tandem with her musical talent to create a sense of stability within the increasingly unstable structure of Büchner’s play.

Overall, Aporia Theater’s production is not to be missed. The cast, crew, designers, and director create a world that supports the disjointed, rural *Woyzeck* world and brings to life an extraordinary play in a profound and moving way.