

The Agony and The Agony, by Nicky Silver. Directed by Chris Foster.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I was a person without a purpose.”

Comedy is a funny thing: you never know for sure where the laughs are, where the jokes hit home, where the tickle becomes the chuckle, and the chuckle turns into the guffaw. Nicky Silver’s play, “The Agony and The Agony” tends to reach too far for the laughs at times. A tortured gay playwright-failure. Richard Aglow played by Dennis Skiba, married to a wealthy heiress/actress, Lela Smith-Aglow played by Lisa Bryk, finds himself burdened with the “spirit” of long-dead Chicago society murderer, Nathan Leopold, Jr. of Leopold and Loeb fame played by Brian Raña.

There is a lot less agony than there is antagonism in this play. Richard pretty much hates everyone, Lela sleeps, or has slept, with everyone and her present-day male whore, Chet, played by Aileem Penn, has a very pregnant girlfriend named Anita played by Olivia Walton.



Lisa Bryk & Dennis Skiba;
Photo: Adam Wilson-Hwang

Everybody has strong feelings about light-fingered Broadway producer Anton Knight, especially Anton Knight who is played by Richard Roe. Silver puts them all into the same apartment at the same time and turns them loose, then lets the comedy play itself out. Richard is never out of his fancy silk pajamas and robe; Lela changes her clothes for success. Leopold is a classy dresser as per his social status pre-prison; Anita is at the nine-month state and is still wearing three-inch heels. Chet, who longs to play Nugget, the blinded horse in “Equus” is in his gym clothes and the producer looks like a producer though his jacket can contain items of silver.

Silver’s play takes this group of people through their paces and they all get their laughs while at the same time begging for our sympathy. There is no one here to empathize with, to beg for our cheers, no one to applaud and root for. This is a weakness in the writing. We laugh but we never cry. We admire the writing skill, but never the characters. Our laughter ultimately feels hollow, feels rotten. By the end of the play we start to hate ourselves for enjoying these people. It’s a risk. When the show was over and I used the men’s room appropriately there was a young man there, masturbating at the urinal. Somehow it felt exactly right and I laughed out loud for perhaps the third time that evening.

Somehow I don't expect anyone else to have that same final experience when they see the play, but they should. When reality gets the best laugh of the show it ought to be applauded, so here's to you, anonymous man. Job well done. The same can be said of Brian Raña who manages to bring a well-rounded if zany character to life. He is protesting the use of his name and history in the play that Richard Aglow is writing. Raña plays Leopold with honesty, perhaps the only character granted that factor. In Act One he is an unseen commentator, but in Act Two he has established a sad rapport with his new author. He stands, or sits, outside the comic realities of this show and seems be a warning to other playwrights not to screw around with history. It's a hard lesson to learn.

Skiba delivers his funny lines with dripping pathos which works for his character. Walton goes for the jugular and makes it pay with laughs. Bryk is never funny but she gets comic reactions just for playing her situation naturally. Ditto Penn: a job well done.

Cheers for the costume designer, Brittney Belz, for



Brian Raña;
Photo: Adam Wilson-Hwang



Brian Raña, Richard Roe, Dennis Skiba, Olivia Walton,
Lisa Bryk, Aileem Penn; Photo: Adam Wilson-Hwang

defining people perfectly with their clothes and cheers to David Caso for his quirky lighting. Director Chris Foster has driven his show with a twang and a twitter and his music choices enhance the show's odd wit. No easy choices grace his work here, so Bravo! Andrew Mannion has given the show its elegance with his scenic design

You won't see many shows like this one, so take a break from political reality and giggle at someone else's

view of the world we live in. Enjoy this agony, if you can.

+ 12/10/2022 +

The Agony and the Agony, a Harbinger production, plays at the Yulman Theater on the campus of Union College in Schenectady through December 17. Tickets may be purchased at Eventbrite, <http://www.eventbrite.com/d/ny-albany/the-agony-and>, or at the door.