

DAMMERUNG

If athletic men and women singing, dancing or emoting in time to seductive plot points seem rather hollow at this time, you should strongly consider seeing the New Worlds Theatre Project's *Dammerung*, written by the great Yiddish dramatist **Peretz Hirshbein** and deftly directed by **Marc Geller**.

Playing at Theatre Row's Lion Theatre until January 25th, *Dammerung* is as stark, provocative, and haunting as its subject matter would demand. Which is what exactly? Well, that would be partly for you to decide. For, more than anything, this play is an enigma, blending the apocalyptic with the lyrical in lieu of the usual culmination of a character's journey.

There are no heroes, gods, or dwarves here, despite the potential for some theatergoers to associate the title with Wagner's Ring Cycle. *Dammerung* is indeed a twilight, but not of immortals, rather of humankind, facing an apocalyptic, bloody end, while a seemingly indifferent deity refuses to intervene.

Translated from the Yiddish by **Ellen Peregman** and **Mark Altman**, Geller uses his talented, mobile cast – on stage throughout – to create an expressionistic landscape that menacingly closes in on the central family: a prescient grandfather (**Andrew Dawson**), his eldest son Nodov (**Augustus Truhn**), and the latter's two daughters, Tomer (**Cally Robertson**) and Zizi (**Alison Frederick**) – joined later by the black sheep of the clan, Nodov's younger brother Heem'n (**Theo Doro**).

Kudos is due here for the robust performances of the leads: Dawson's stiff, spindly physicality is a wonderfully visceral counterpoint to the virile, serpentine power of Doro's Heem'n, while Truhn, himself tall and otherwise imposing, effectively disappears into a near-emasculated softness and grief. Robertson's Tomer - perhaps the hardest role in the play to interpret - while admirably earnest, could benefit from more range than that of self-effacing maidenhood, but Frederick is convincing in her little child's wonderment and terror.

The rest of the ensemble, masked and garbed in a motley patchwork of leather, while playing reed whistles, shaking wood chimes or tinkling rough-hewn bells, eerily depict the so-called Others (Jeremy Gender, Nicholas Gorham, and Michael Mott) – a stripped-down Greek chorus, framing the family's fear and desperation with its dissonant environment of doom.

The plot, briefly, is as follows: while a bloody civil war rages beyond his modest cottage in an unnamed forest, the grandfather as prescient paterfamilias foresees tragedy for those who still believe in a loving God, his own faith resting in an endlessly punitive divinity. But Tomer, his pure and compassionate granddaughter voices her determination to leave the hut and enter the war zone, to offer her love of all humanity – a love inspired by God – in order to bring peace. Her own role model for such altruism is her pure-hearted, gentle father, Nodov. Before she can carry out her mission, however, her hitherto-unknown and seductively worldly Uncle Heem'n appears in a bid to disenchant her of idealism.

What happens next is part dream, part tragedy, as befits a playwright whom many have called "the Yiddish Maeterlinck". *Dammerung* is a play for all of us who wonder how we can bear humanity's tremendous capacity for good and evil, and who, beyond our conscience, we should ultimately answer to.

- Review by Al Davidian
for StageBuddy.com