

Wicked Wit, Rending Tragedy in “The Suitcase” | Theatre Ghost

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“What if we do a vaudeville routine about the Holocaust?”
“No, no.” “Bad taste. Insensitive.” “That’d never work.”

Never say never to a Polish playwright. One of that country’s most accomplished comic writers, Malgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, has packed vaudeville and death camps into *The Suitcase* — and it works.

How? You’ve got to see it to believe it. And luckily, you can. Two of LA’s best theatre companies, Echo Theatre Company and The West, are giving Sikorska’s wry tale its American premiere, and it’s an experience you won’t soon forget.



Alexandra Freeman, Vincent Castellanos (photo: Eric Keitel)

It all looks so simple. Before a patchwork curtain, the stage is bare, save an odd object that looks like leftover pegboard bits stuck together. An ingratiating

narrator sings, tells a joke or two, then offers the tale of Franswa Jackoh, a fellow at loose ends in his retirement whose wife tells him to get out of the house.

At her suggestion, he goes to a museum. Turns out it's a museum of the Holocaust. Turns out (as a lively quasi-musical number reveals) that while an art museum contains art, there's no Holocaust here. Just photographs, names, film clips, piles of shoes ...

I don't remember the last time a joke made me laugh *and* cry. But Sikorska's piercing wit — in Artur Zapalowski's deft translation, with the troupe's skillful delivery — does it again and again.

Ultimately, Franswa encounters the suitcase. Like Rilke standing before the headless bust of Apollo, he realizes that he must change his life. But that's all the story I'll give away.

What I'll say instead is that this piece of art — pared down to theatre's bare beginnings — will tickle and shock and sting and, yes, console you. It may even make you think about changing your life.

Director Sam Hunter keeps the actors to the simplest outlines of movement, while encouraging them to find the complexity of character Sikorska's sketches suggest.

Jeff Alan-Lee balances the narrator's antics between amusing and irritating, slowly letting us sense what he's trying to balance inside; Claire Kaplan, as his pierrette, juggles forcefulness and flirtation, hinting at what may be love as she nudges the story onward. Alexandra Freeman, the "Miserable Tour Guide," shines at the edge of sanity, struggling to hold (and hold off) the history she's immersed in; Sigute Miller, a psychic cafe poet, wears a many-colored coat of implied stories. Eric Keitel's stillness lets a single gesture be a climax; and Vincent Castellanos contains so much in Franswa's mild manner that we both hope and fear to find what's locked inside.

The Suitcase's exterior is unassuming; but within lives a powerful and

provocative work of theatre. Brilliantly written and delicately performed, this play joins wicked comedy and piercing tragedy to help us confront and deal with who we are, what we have done, and whether we dare to remember.

The Suitcase, by Malgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, directed by Sam Hunter.
Presented by Echo Theatre Company and The West, at Atwater Village Theatre,
3269 Casitas Ave., LA 90039.

Wednesdays and Thursdays at 8:00,
through August 18.

Tickets: <www.echotheatre.com> or (310) 307-3753

[**Note**: Hunter and Kaplan, the two troupe members from The West, have collaborated before — most notably in their stunning *Lady Into Fox*, seen on several LA stages last winter. (My review is below.)]