



2007 New York International Fringe Festival Reviews

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Poppies

reviewed by Kat Chamberlain

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In this at once war-sensitive and war-fatigued time, many have looked back to past conflicts to draw parallels with conflicts of today, yet new perspectives seem hard to come by. The politically savvy often smell the "message" from a mile away. That is why Lane Keller's *Poppies* deserves a close look: it offers a complex examination from the perspective of a group of people marked as the aggressor.

The time is 1999 and NATO, led by the United States, is bombing Belgrade. The play grabs the audience from the start by simultaneously showing its main characters going about their lives at a café/bar, a radio station, and a warehouse serving as a paramilitary headquarters. We meet Bog (meaning "God"), a drag-queen DJ broadcasting from Serbia's last non-state radio station; Jana, a vivacious and world-weary waitress stressing over her brother Niko, who is with the ruthless paramilitary group "White Tigers"; Ara, a Kosovar Albanian and Niko's past lover; Duke, an American reporter with a hidden agenda who becomes involved with Jana; and Zarkan, a forceful paramilitary leader. As these characters' lives intertwine, conflicts within the conflict ensue.

Almost irate in its tone, *Poppies* reflects the despair of being caught in the middle; it's interested in observing how people struggle to believe that their ends truly justify their means, while all options seem repugnant. "Okay, we're free. Hell, that's what the press says. So let's celebrate!" Bog mocks the world from his pulpit with exaggerated glee. All hell has broken loose and one simply doesn't know what to believe anymore.

Tight as the play is, what keeps it from being great is the snapshot approach of its storytelling. It doesn't stay on one character, one narrative, or even one observation long before switching to another aspect of the war. So we hear about —as opposed to see— guns, drugs, big business, and oil. The intellectual commentary is interesting, yet the emotional journey zigzags where it should venture further down the single proverbial path.

I also wish Keller laid more groundwork in informing us of some facts of the war in the play's first 15 minutes. A simple Google search or five minutes of reading on Wikipedia prior to coming to the show might be recommended if you don't know much about this particular page of history. That is, of course, if the play is intended for us to contemplate on war in the particular context of Kosovo. For a more universal and human appeal, the uniformly brilliant performances of the actors more than suffice. Director Sherri Eden Barber fills the stage with tension, and music by Nikola Matic adds wonderful texture.

Even harder to quibble with is Keller's blissfully cliché-free language and insight. With the play's scathing humor and brutal honesty, war has never seemed more pitiful and desolate. After a ground-shaking moment that destroys a kitchen, Duke the American is in a panic mode, while Jana remarks, "You call that a bomb?" "What do you call it?" Duke asks. "Normal," Jana replies, "Stick around. Maybe you'll get a real one." One can clearly sense the resilience of Serbs as a people, who, "like Poppies, will rise again."

Written/created by: Lane Keller
Directed by Sherri Eden Barber
Presented by 5th Wall Theatre Co.