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The Dumb Waiter



While rehearsing the exact manner in which they were going to carry out the execution, the excitable Gus asks the annoyed Ben what they'd do if it turns out who they were trying to kill were a girl. "We do the same," says a motionless and self-assured Ben. "Exactly the same?" asks a concentrated Gus? "Exactly the same."

The contrast in styles bring out the differences in personal philosophy of two stereotypes of the daily existence in Landon Johnson's production of Harold Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter" at the Complex, as part of the Hollywood Fringe festival. It is a performance that brings the abstraction of the absurd into reality, a focus on the real then and there of the British play, a production kids would enjoy.

That much is known: it takes place in Wilson's place. Ben (Jordan Randall) and Gus (Kristopher Lee Bicknell) are two would-be assassins on a new job, though most of the time, they have no idea what they're actually supposed to do, a microcosm for the well-programmed but purposeless life. Ben is reading a newspaper article about a girl of eight who killed a cat while her brother (of eleven) watched from the toolshed. Little do they know that this is the foretelling of the end of the play (enough to make a cat laugh). Gus is anxious, wanting to "light the kettle" to get some tea before their job, while the senior member, Ben, coolly dismiss him, telling him it's "put on the kettle."

They can't help but want further direction in life from the "dumb waiter," the shoot that brings them cryptic messages from "upstairs," mostly having to do with food (soup of the day, liver and onions, jammed tart, water chestnut, bamboo shoots and chicken). Ben and Gus are so desperate for direction that they make their offering by sending up their milk, chocolate, biscuits, Gus's Eccles cake and crisps he was saving for beer. But their call is not answered, and they have no gas for lighting the kettle, and their toilet flushes only randomly. They have no direction for what to do, until a note arrives from the dumb waiter.

Johnson's production takes place in a room with audience seated on all sides. At times, audience participation is almost implied, such as when Gus goes offstage to the toilet. The bed and the chair are diametrically opposed to each other, as are the personalities of Ben (who starts on the chair and table) and Gus (who starts on the bed). A brief role reversal sees Ben on the bed, but that is quickly returned to normalcy. Ben is the "follow-the-rules" kind of guy, and this is what makes the ending make sense. Gus is expressive, throwing things on the ground, asking Ben why they sent down matches when there's no gas, etc. He wanders all over the room, and the set supplies him with just a minimum of furniture to keep occupied.

Bicknell's performance is fresh and exciting. He brings a sense of incredulity to everything he says. When his Gus converses with Ben at the beginning and end of the play about the news, we have two

different interpretations: one that is fresh and one realizing that the same nonsense has been repeated, but each time Bicknell puts his excitement into it: "get away... it's unbelievable." Bicknell's every complaint sounds like a cry out against life: "you notice they didn't ask for any salad?... they probably got a salad bowl up there." Randall is subtle but perfectly cast for Ben. He spends much of the play lampooning Gus, but at the end, we realize he is just trying to follow orders in a world without a definite order. In one episode, Ben teaches Gus how to use the whistle to phone upstairs, as if this is how it was supposed to be done. When he calls, nobody answers. Randall gives an air of mocked seriousness, and perhaps a bit too much annoyances. However, he makes these gestures appear humorous rather than distraction.

Pinter's play is a classic in the absurdist canon, but by going to this production, you'd realize how accessible the work is. Even without the metaphors of society, the world, and the individual, the production stands on its own with a couple of contrasting characters, as well as a couple of contrasting areas of the room where you're close to the action, and hence involved in it.

"The Dumb Waiter" is performed at the Complex (<http://pintersdumbwaiter.wordpress.com/>) in Hollywood, California, as part of the Hollywood Fringe festival (<http://www.hollywoodfringe.org/>) until 26 of June, 2011.