

Silence Is Warning

The silence of the people is a warning for the king.

By Robert Tobey

I'm skeptical of political art. Too often—and especially in the privileged preserve of the upper Pioneer Valley—altruism and prescriptive notions become an easy substitute for contrary and complex realities, the conflicting impulses deep in human nature.

Political art can be redeemed by passion and imagination, but the most immediately persuasive ingredient is a sense of hard evidence, the testimony of witnesses. One can bicker over causes and remedies for our desperate and divided circumstance, but first-hand experience, when honestly and directly delivered, must be heard and heeded.

A Warning for the King, a new play by The Performance Project presented in cooperation with the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts, begins in a manner that recalls tendentious art dealing with race relations: a languid jazz saxophone solo sets the mood. A large dreadlock-textured ruby-red ball of yarn—a visual device that neatly suggests a loose gathering of narrative threads, but which is employed also as a symbol for utopian communion—is caressed, possessed and struggled over.

I took a deep breath and prepared for a bout of strenuously uplifting, wearying propaganda. But almost immediately I was engaged by the energy, the vivid veracity, of the performances. And it was clear from the hush, and the occasional

helpless outburst of laughter, surprise, recognition, that the audience felt similarly gripped.

Most of the players in The Performance Project have been imprisoned or addicted or discriminated against, deprived and abused. The genesis for the text of the drama are sessions in which these actors-in-training—guided by veteran directors Julie Lichtenberg and Leslie Parlow—share their stories of hard beginnings, shaming injustice, dire consequences and compulsions. They are brought together to bear witness, say the unsayable, throw light into the previously shadowed regions of their lives, to give to inflicted misery a name and shape and thereby grasp and assuage it—and, in the process produce vital, expressive art.

Remarkably, each player is effective. Each, in different ways and at different levels of volume and intensity, takes the stage with credibility and authority. There's hardly a moment that is not charged with drama. In the performance I saw, the level of empathy with the audience was extraordinary, immediate, in a call and response, shock-of-recognition sort of way.

While the overall form remains amorphous—at this stage it is a loose gathering of varying narrative threads—on a visceral level, the play is consistently forceful. In skits, song and rap rendition, the players act out harrowing episodes of their personal histories. Proof of the authenticity of these

narratives is the sweetening humor contained in them: injustice and desperation are anguishing in part because utterly ridiculous as well. The actors tell tales of the inanities of bureaucracy, the foolish logic at the heart of discrimination, the white-knuckle absurdities of addiction.

The play is a trifle heavy-handed when it comes to indicting and slapping around Corporate Whitey (does anyone really believe President Obama, should we be lucky enough to get him, will drive a stake through the heart of draculaic capitalism; does anyone doubt that he hasn't in his upward climb already donated a few pints of his ethical lifeblood to that monster?). But it is thoroughly worthwhile, a blast of wicked fun, to watch Court Dorsey—a treasure of the Valley theatre scene for decades—run rampant, go utterly over-the-top nuts, become a sucking, spewing vortex of insatiable desire when possessed by the venal spirit of White Devil, delivering a gleeful litany of our materialistic wants and needs and a dizzying catalogue of the buzzwords that signify them. Aside from being irresistibly entertaining, this caricature serves as an effective foil for highlighting the intimacy and integrity, the quieter drama, of the narratives delivered by the real-life players: Clive Brown, Richard Carden, James Hall, Paris Holms, and Frances Smith.

A Warning for the King plays at 8 p.m. February 1-3 at Holyoke Community College.