Between the Lines

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 canlicker over causes and remedies for our desperate and divided circumstance, but firsthand 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, which is employed also as a symbol for utopian communism—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 thelush, 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 to alcohol or discriminated against, deprived, and abused. The genesis for the test 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, shame, injustice, dire consequences and compulsions. They are brought together to bear witness, say the unspeakable, throw light into the previously shadowed regions of their lives, to give to inflicted misery a name and shape and thereby grasp andassemble 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-and-recognition sort of way.

While the overall form remains acochasmos—at this stage it is a loose gathering of varying narrative threads—on a visceral level, the play is consistently forceful. In skins, song and rap rendition, the players act out harrowing episodes of their personal histories. Proof of the authenticity of these narratives is the swarming humor contained in them: injustice and desperation are anguish in part because utterly ridiculous as well. The actors tell tales of the insanities 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 inditing and slapping around Corporate Whiley (does anyone really believe President Obama, should we be lucky enough to get him, will drive a stake through the heart of dictatorial capitalism), does anyone doubt that he hasn’t in his upward climb already donated a few parts of his ethical livelihood to that monster?). But it is thoroughly worthwhile, a blast of wicked fun, to watch Court Donney—a treasure of the Valley theatre scene for decades—rambunctious, go utterly over-the-top nuts, become a snarling, spewing vortex of insatiable desire when possessed by the venal spirit of White Devil, delivering a glorious 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 of the character drama of the narratives delivered by the real-life players: Clive Brown, Richard Castien, James Hall, Paris Holmes, and Frances Smith.

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