

Widows make for fascinating theatre



Military men. Darren Turner and Kevin Owen ramp up the tension as Theatre Erindale presents *Widows* until Oct. 24. *Photo supplied*

Mark Andrew Lawrence
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The students at Erindale never shy away from tough material, and *Widows*, a powerful and thought-provoking play by Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman, provides ample opportunity to explore the darker side of humanity.

Set in a small village in an area recently ravaged by war, the women wait in vain for their men to return. A badly mutilated corpse turns up in the river and rather than be allowing it to raise questions, a corrupt yet conflicted officer orders it removed and burned. Problem solved, until another corpse surfaces and all of the widows lay claim to it. Leading the way is Rachelle Magil with a tightly controlled performance as the grandmother Sofia Fuentes. This is a woman who has lost a father, a husband and two sons. Some of the townsfolk think she is senile but in time she reveals a heroic mixture of inner strength and wisdom.

She is matched by Ramon Vitug as her devoted grandson who suffers badly at the hands of the officials. Darren Turner plays up the inner conflict of the vile Captain and creates some tense moments with Kevin Owen as his insolent Lieutenant.

Director Bill Lane creates tension as much with the silent passages as with the high decibel confrontations. Live musicians punctuate the action with percussion and strings and the piece is played on a unique multi-level playing space designed by Patrick Young and Peter Urbanek. Add to all of this some brilliantly executed lighting effects by James W. Smagata including one that evokes the swirling river that yields the bodies.

With so much going for it, the play itself sometimes stumbles over the author's intentions. Adapted from his 1983 novel, the playwright has clear sympathy for the plight of the peasant women, but he gets a bit heavy-handed and repetitive with his detailing of the military. Nevertheless, the play raises a number of issues, and doesn't offer easy answers. *Widows* leaves the viewer with questions that will linger long after the final curtain. You may not always be sure of where it is headed but you'll be fascinated by the journey.

Widows continues at Theatre Erindale until Saturday, Oct. 24. Performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday thru Thursday evenings and at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. There is also a 2 p.m. matinee on Saturday. For tickets, call the box office at 905-569-4369.

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“WIDOWS”; *black, depressing; yet powerful theatre*



Review by **Danny Gaisin**

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One cannot discuss playwright *Ariel Dorfman* without reference to his Judaic background and his close association with the government of Salvador Allende. Dorfman was born in Argentina. Although his parents were wealthy, they exhibited strong socialist & communist leanings. Ariel carried on those attitudes and when the family settled in Chile, he became part of the Allende administration. The United States; fearing that Chile's fascination with the Cuban Castro dictatorship would be imitated- arranged the Pinochet coup through the machinations of the C.I.A. Allende supposedly committed suicide. One can understand that Dorfman's writing would have a strong political predisposition and his 'WIDOWS' is no exception. This play about a tyrannical autocracy has been staged in almost every democratic nation world-wide.



Theatre Erindale; and guest director *Bill Lane* have undertaken to stage this dark tragedy with a full cast and utilizes a creative but rudimentary set. The plotline deals with a rural farm area where all the male inhabitants have been militarily sequestered and/or eliminated. The women have no idea which; nor do they have any recourse from the occupying officers. There are three inter-related contrivances... the women under the influence of the eldest; one of the younger married girls and her soldier paramour; and the relationship between the newly-appointed captain and his resident lieutenant. All three are allegorically co-related

Prima matriarch Sofia is an amazing lady & powerfully depicted by *Rachelle Magil*. Her strength and determination is only outdone by her personal bravery. She is the epitome of my own Grandmother who was a pioneer in Northern Ontario; a society leader who brought respectability to the new towns along the railway, and an early suffragette. Magil portrays her with stance; body language and dramatic timing. Even her extended pauses are effective underscores. The soldier – Emmanuel- with his personal conflict between dedication and promotional opportunities in the service; and yearning for his local intended – Cecilia, could be any episode of today's sitcoms. *Mark Johnston* and *Melanie Hrymak* are both more than credible in their interpretations. Johnston is especially capable is espousing the human dichotomy of balancing work and desire.

It is the military duo whose interplay is the most striking (*pun intended*). **Darren Turner** arrives with a hope of democratizing the political environment, yet still required to maintain order. Pacification is his ambition. His nemesis (Iago-like) is the pragmatic *Kevin Owen* who through his hardheaded realism has maintained authoritarian control. Owen manages to understatedly project every representation of totalitarian regimes. His soft-tempered Gestapo tactics are even more chilling due to their mundanity (*sic*). But it is Turner who must make the transition from idealist to pragmatist and Turner is a standout. Even without the officer-size, his bearing and manner make him easily identifiable. His metamorphosis may be gradual but becomes inexorable. The moment where he hesitatingly shakes hands with his subordinate is manifest with imagery of personal surrender... it gives a very powerful impression. There is a brief episode where *Andrew Tribe* is released as a placation and admits to his abject confessions under torture. Another powerful impact.

Bill Lane brings an almost Shakespearean atmosphere to his interpretation of the play. The blackness is fundamental but he manages to illustrate indomitability of spirit, and even optimism in the face of adversity. I kept thinking of stories about Auschwitz inmates entering the gas chambers with a final shoulders back and 'El Moleh Rachamim' as a final gesture of resistance. Lane has articulated an unusual but compelling performance. My counterpart – Mark David Lawrence observed that his use of percussion and violin background act as a form of punctuation. Effective is but a euphemism.

WIDOWS is at Theatre Erindale on the UTM Campus until Oct. 24th.

Comments, email me at dgaisin@ontarioartsreview.ca