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'Wanderer' invites questions, thoughts

Eternal issues of life, death explored but no answers given

*By Joseph T. Rozmiarek
Special to The Advertiser*

The most interesting aspect of "Nocturnal Wanderer" by Gao Xingjian, now in the Late Night time slot at the Earle Ernst Lab Theatre, is that it is banned from production in China. The playwright has renounced his Chinese citizenship, lives in Europe and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2000.

The second surprise is that he is nearly 70 years old, largely because "Wanderer" — which dates to 1999 — has the questioning and probing intensity more readily associated with a young man's work. It addresses questions of life and death through a dream state existence, provides no answers, and is not the least bit compelled to connect its dots.

Nor is it overtly political.

Playing 90 minutes without intermission, the central character named Sleep-walker/Traveler is something of an insomniac who decides to take a long walk on the wrong side of town.

There he encounters a homeless man, a prostitute, a street thug and a gangland figure — all with the naiveté of a strayed innocent lacking the sense to head back to the safety of his hotel.

There's shock, brutality, violence, a human head in a suitcase, and — ultimately — the sense that Sleepwalker has compromised himself and become an unwitting accomplice to the evil he would have preferred to avoid.

Directed by doctoral student Ronald Gilliam and featuring Nicholas Atiburcio in the central role, the dialogue shoots out in staccato bursts — an essentially monotone delivery broken by pauses. It is as if the speaker unloads each thought as it occurs, then waits to empty his mind until the next thought becomes too heavy to hold.

Consequently, we don't emotionally identify with the character, nor — I suspect because of Xingjian's influence by Beckett and Ionesco — are we supposed to.

Gilliam stages the action among two heaps of cardboard boxes, punctuated by a doorway. Costumes are shades of black and gray, with the appropriate exception of bright red for the prostitute.

The play begins with a train ride where none of the passengers has the appropriate ticket and ends with a death figure that comes to collect final payment. It might best be considered a metaphor that invites audience interpretation.

Additional Facts

'Nocturnal Wanderer'

University of Hawai'i-Manoa's Earle Ernst Lab Theatre
11 p.m. Friday-Saturday
\$5-\$10 general admission
956-7655, www.hawaii.edu/kennedy
