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Dialogue clearer than message in 'Wanderer'

By John Berger

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Sep 15, 2009

(Page 1 of 2) | [Single Page View](#)

Accepting a protagonist who speaks of himself in the second person when narrating his experiences turns out to be much easier than figuring out what playwright Gao Xingjian is saying in the story as UH-Manoa opens its 2009-2010 theater season with a Late Night Theatre production of Gao's "Nocturnal Wanderer" in the Earle Ernst Lab Theatre.



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Nicholas Atiburcio gives an impressive performance as the sleepwalker in Gao's self-described "nightmare in three short acts."

There is no intermission, and Atiburcio is on stage almost every moment of its running time of 1 hour, 20 minutes.

In that time we experience the sleepwalker's frustration, fear, fatigue, anger and dehumanization in convincing style.

The sleepwalker's nocturnal excursions plunge him into a brutish inner-city film noir environment.

A ruffian (Bronzen Hahn) brutalizes him. An armed thug (Lavour Vernon Addison) makes him the victim in a cruel game of cat-and-mouse and then orders him to take a suitcase "across the street."

A prostitute (Michelle Boudreau) taunts the sleepwalker one minute and tries to seduce him the next. He is conflicted — does he want her or does she disgust him? Should he try to rescue her from the dangers of her profession, or is he intruding in areas that are none of his business?

The mean streets of the unnamed city are also home to a wino (James Schirmer) who lives in a large cardboard box hidden in a pile of similar detritus. Schirmer's performance as the feisty and philosophical derelict made him an audience favorite — and got him most of the laughs — on opening night.

The bum's ability to pop up out of the trash pile added brief moments of comic relief to the sleepwalker's unpleasant wanderings.

Boudreau, dressed in eye-catching red amid the darker clothing of the men, is the centerpiece of several scenes; the prostitute is the one person the sleepwalker meets who is apparently vulnerable, as well as threatening.

Hahn and Addison are both suitably menacing. Hahn represents casual, small-time troublemakers; Addison adds nightmarish mind games and the possibility of sudden death to the equation.

As for the sleepwalker's use of "you" rather than "I" when speaking about himself, it isn't conventional English, but he is easily understood nonetheless.

Finding something to take away in terms of what Gao is saying about, well, anything is a far greater challenge. Is there reason to care about what happens to anyone—even the sleepwalker — or do we count the minutes until his nightmares are over and we're free to go?

It's anyone's guess how the members of the sold-out house would have voted after the opening-night performance on Saturday.

'Nocturnal Wanderer'

» Where: Earle Ernst Lab Theatre, UH-Manoa



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