‘A Murder of Crows,’ a bird’s-eye view of a heedless world

By Anne Brice, Berkeley News | NOVEMBER 18, 2015

Set in a harsh, dystopian future, *A Murder of Crows* — the latest production by the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies — follows a dysfunctional small-town family living in a warped world on the verge of total ecological destruction.

Written by Mac Wellman in 1992, but still relevant today, the play rebels against theatrical conventions, experimenting with language and humor to examine the darkest parts of humanity and expose the toxic effect that humankind has had on the world.

Cecily Schmidt, a double major in theater and performance studies and cognitive science, plays Susannah, an angst-ridden teenager who lives unhappily with her materialistic aunt and uncle, and sees the weather as her only escape.

“She thinks something cataclysmic needs to happen to wipe the slate clean,” says Schmidt. “So she’s always looking at the weather and hoping for it to change the world.”

Although Susannah is stuck in a sort of unevolved adolescence, she is perhaps the most self-aware character in the play. She realizes that people take for granted many of the simplest things — a blue sky, a grassy field, a glass of water — a notion that Schmidt says is especially relevant to California’s current drought and the ongoing destruction of the planet.

In the middle of the play, three crows stand perched above the action, observing the characters below with a shrewd perspective. Played by seniors Nicole Anderson, Mia Semelman and Sahori Tiffany Sumita, the crows represent a more mindful society, providing commentary — both in their birdlike body language and then, more directly, in their philosophical recitations — about the characters’ absurd interactions below. It’s a society that Susannah sees as a better alternative to the dysfunctional civilization that she inhabits.

The play will transport the audience to a different world, Schmidt says, and the audience should be ready to dive in headfirst and swim through the oil-polluted oceans quivering like custard and come out on the other side.

*A Murder of Crows* opens Thursday, Nov. 19, and continues through Sunday, Nov. 22 in the Durham Studio Theater on campus. Following the 2 p.m. performance on Saturday, playwright Mac Wellman will join Carey Perloff, the artistic director of ACT in San Francisco, in conversation to discuss the play. Tickets are $13-$20 and can be purchased online or at the door.
To check out performance times or buy tickets, visit the Theater, Dance and Performance Studies [website](http://news.berkeley.edu/2015/11/18/play-a-murder-of-crows-tdps/).

The crows, played by Nicole Anderson, Mia Semelman and Tiffany Sumita, provide a philosophical perspective to the play. (UC Berkeley photo by Alessandra Mello)

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