THEATER

Chaos flocks to ‘A Murder of Crows’

By Peter Alexander | Staff

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Mac Wellman’s “A Murder of Crows,” directed by Peter Glazer, played at UC Berkeley’s Durham Studio Theater from Nov. 19-22. On the production’s opening night, UC Berkeley’s Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies (TDPS) put on a performance of Wellman’s play that displayed myriad insightful and well-acted moments. Yet despite some lovely moments, the performance’s portrayal of certain character relationships fell off the mark, and as a result, a few scenes came across as disjointed.

“A Murder of Crows” tells the story of a broken and crooked family that struggles to survive in a postapocalyptic world. The play focuses on Susannah (played by Cecily Schmidt), who is described by the production’s program as “a young person with a vision and a hearty contempt for her elders.” Susannah spends the play trying to convince the other characters of her strong premonition that big change, especially a change in the weather, will soon come to their stagnantly rancid world.

Susannah’s vision for change echoes that of her father, who is supposedly deceased when the play begins. Susannah’s father, Raymond (played by Samuel Peurach), reveals to Susannah (but to no one else) that he is alive and encourages Susannah’s optimism for change. Raymond lives with the crows, which he befriended after his supposed death. The crows (played by Sahori Sumita, H. Nicole Anderson and Mia Semnelman) enter with Raymond and spend most of the rest of the play perched just above the stage.

The father-daughter relationship depicted between Susannah and a “resurrected” Raymond captured a warm, established love. Upon Raymond’s reveal, the audience could feel a sense of intimate history between the characters, and Cecily Schmidt played an overwhelming surprise that felt completely correct for their previously hopeless reunion. Finding a believable father-daughter relationship between actors, especially between those with similar ages, is no easy task. Peurach and Schmidt did so beautifully.

Anna Easteden did well to find the humor in her performance as Neila, Susannah’s despairing mom. The script otherwise depicts her character as one in total desperation, struggling to keep an awful situation afloat. Wellman’s writing gives Neila the opportunity for humor, but many actors would not execute this hilarity as acutely as Easteden did. For instance, just after a drawn-out quarrel over Raymond’s coffin, Neila takes advantage of a brief, alone moment by jumping into the coffin and proclaiming, “If the shoe fits!” Easteden’s execution of the action maximized the moment’s potential humor.

Both the crows and Andy, Susannah’s brother (depicted as quite literally a statue) recently returned from war, add different, physical perspectives to the performance. Each offer very few words throughout the performance, although Andy offers a superb monologue near the play’s end. But both enforce their presence by physically remaining on or around the stage for most of the

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performance, and their continuous presence without dialogue adds an interesting, appropriate
tension to most of the performance’s scenes.

One of the ways in which the performance fell short came in the form of the relationship between
Susannah’s aunt and uncle — Georgia and Howard (played by Tiana Randall-Quant and Ran
Flanders, respectively). Although it was clear that the two actors approached their respective
characters with distinct and commendable ideas of who the characters should be, the two did not
always complement each other.

That is not to say that the characters were written to agree with each other. In fact, quite the
opposite is true. But the quarrelling couple, at times, slowed the play down and, as a result, took
away from the audience’s ability to understand certain scenes. Some of their arguments felt weighty
and overly serious when a snappier tempo might have even added a wanted layer of humor to
already desolate circumstances. This occasional dip in tempo also caused pauses that took away
from the overall comprehensibility of a few scenes in a play that was already written as intentionally
vague.

The production’s technical elements perfectly complemented the actors’ performances. For example,
the different hues of sickening orange light that shifted throughout the performance created the
perfect ambiance for Wellman’s rancid postapocalypse. Another beautiful moment came when
Schmidt’s character tossed an imaginary rock into an imaginary pond. After each rock toss, the
unique plopping sound of a rock in water echoed at the exact moment when the rock would have hit
the pond.

An audience member can only hope to grasp moments from any performance of Wellman’s script, as
it is not written to make complete sense in the way that a traditional narrative might. But despite the
script’s intentional bit of chaos, this performance sometimes unintentionally lost its way. TDPS’
performance of “A Murder of Crows” succeeded in many places, but at times, it failed to produce the
necessary clarity for some of the show’s important moments.

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