

Yellow ooze drips from the stage. When I first took my seat in Durham Studio Theater, I took the gooey disaster, combined with the halved trees and murky backdrop to be a commentary on environmental deterioration. Yet as the UC theater, dance, and performance studies (TDPS) department's production of *A Murder of Crows* unraveled, the ooze seemed more of a metaphor for my mind.

Written by Mac Wellman around the time of the Gulf War, the play follows the dysfunctional family of Susannah. Her mother, Nella, carries on with her life with a seemingly optimistic attitude from the "inspirational books" she's read, despite the fact that her husband may be dead and her son who may or may not have died in the war. These potential deaths have left the two women broke and homeless, turning to Susannah's uncle Howard and aunt Georgia for food and shelter. However, fed up with her mother's ignorance and her family's greed, Susannah embodies the "rebel" child, constantly staring up at the sky through green binoculars, waiting for the weather--and the world--to change.

Cecily Schmidt commanded the stage with the essence of the rebellious teenager. With frizzy black and purple hair, a tie-dyed shirt, old chucks, and shabby jeans, Schmidt skidded around disrespecting her elders like any angsty adolescent would. Her mannerisms gave her character wonderful depth, flinging her arms with disgust and walking off in a huff with her fists clenched.

Schmidt's role presented the perfect dichotomy to the greed of her uncle Howard (Ran Flanders) and her aunt Georgia (Tiana Randall-Quant). This eccentric, brightly-clad duo stole most of the show's laughs. From their gaudy demeanor--Randall-Quant performs a diatribe about Susannah and Nella, and Flanders lashes out at his brother as he stands on his casket--to the wealth that they undeservingly earned, the two breathe life into their characters with subtle idiosyncrasies and flawless comedic timing.

However, there were times when dialogue seemed rushed and spoken too fast to understand. Anna Easteden, who played Nella, occasionally stumbled over her lines and seemed robotic at times. Also, though the crows are a crucial aspect of the production, their leering over the audience made it difficult to concentrate on what was happening on the main stage. The audience was fascinated by the creatures adorned in black bodysuits, feathers, and masks, but sometimes had trouble deciding where to look--at the birds or at the actors. "They are an observant and intrusive and irreverent presence in the play, just as they are in the real world, and the impossibility of their presence fascinates me," the director, Peter Glazer, states about the crows.

The odd, incomprehensible, and abstract script and ideas of Wellman are difficult to define. Challenging ideas of environmental decay, moral hypocrisy, and xenophobia--to name a few--becomes problematic as the actors lose the audience in a sea of ideas with no way to

logically understand them. Lacking clarity made the production difficult to follow. When it ended, I didn't even realize it was over until the actors joined hands for their bow. The complexity left the audience unsatisfied, and wanting more from the production: both in action and in answers.

However, as I sat in my room observing the weather outside and ruminating on the themes of the play, I wonder if perhaps the production actually thrived from this dearth of cohesiveness. The elusiveness allows audience members to draw its own conclusions and provide their own solutions. The fact that we never quite figure out what happened with the weather makes me wonder if Wellman is perhaps suggesting that we, as a society, desire change and are *still* waiting for it. Perhaps the weather is *still* changing.

“As a student here I think this production embodies the spirit of revolution and I think that is something that the youth on this campus need to hold onto, because I feel like the more adapted we become to our society the more that forces actively try to silence the spirit and voice of change. We all have the power of a storm to change society,” Samuel Donald Peurach, who plays Susannah's potentially deceased father, states.

Susannah seeks a way out of the world she's living in. She yearns for change. The possibility of “something else” intrigues her. And it intrigues the audience. A notable scene includes Easteden, Flanders, and Randall-Quant describing their ideas of what the world and heaven are like. Each person's ideas are different, but each of them is just as justified. And it forces us to question how to live and thrive in a world where everybody thinks differently. The beauty of Wellman and Glazer is that they don't tell us. It's up to our interpretation.

Even so, the play touches on themes greater than that--issues that trap us, issues that detain us, issues that hold us back from progressing both as individuals and as a society. “What do you do when the world, and the country you live in, feel so out of touch with what seems important, with what matters? One thing I think [Wellman] is trying to do is address that dysfunction head on. Let's not pretend it's all going great, he is telling us. He doesn't shy away from the things that plague us as a society, and his characters don't either” Glazer states.

While *A Murder of Crows* has its flaws, it is still worth your time contemplating and criticizing the dysfunctional society we have found ourselves in today. And I can guarantee you that this production will lead you on a psychological mind warp that will confuse you in your seat but will enlighten you in the rest of your journey as you wait for the weather to change.