

Coyote on a Fence

Theatre of Arts at Arena Stage

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



Rob Nagle and Cody Kearsley

Photo by Jujube Zaoer

Coyotes don't play fetch and greet us at the door and guard us in our homes. Coyotes are the predator version of our snuggly pups. They are the canines with the need to kill, excused—but not usually forgiven—because they're programmed that way. Do we know of people like that?

Two inmates on Death Row, each a predator in his own way, are the fascinating main characters in this Bruce Graham play. John Brennan is an educated, intelligent, well-spoken man, convicted of kicking to death a drug dealer. Bobby Reyburn is an ill-tended young man, convicted of setting fire to a church of African-American congregants, burning 37 people to death, including 14 children in Sunday school. Do we like one of these two inmates more than the other at this point?

The men meet when Bobby moves in to the cell adjacent to John's. Bobby is damaged from his upbringing—underprivileged and abused, perhaps a little bit confused. Less is spoken of John's background. Yet John is the force driving the play. Perhaps that's

why there's shock to be had at the play's end.

Director James Warwick cast well, and character work has laid a solid foundation for the unlikely friendship between John and Bobby. The scenes between these two men are absorbing, a credit to the writing, direction, and acting. Cody Kearsley is stellar as white supremacist Bobby. This murderer's vile commentary on African-Americans and Jews ought to disgust the audience. As Kearsley plays him, however, Bobby remains vaguely appealing, disturbingly worthy of empathy—perhaps more like a coyote pup.

Rob Nagle plays John as highly intelligent but not annoyingly so, deeply pained but not weepily so. This character has secrets; and, though Nagle seems to know all of them, he's not sharing.

Less successful are scenes with the play's two other characters, apparently because Graham felt he needed them to shoehorn in additional information. That's no fault of very competent actors Benjamin Cooper Mathes, playing the New York Times reporter, and Lisa Valenzuela, playing the prison guard. And Warwick's staging ensures that scenes flow one into the next—though at one point a conversation between the reporter and John seems to morph into a conversation between John and Bobby, turning the action dreamlike.

Also creating a probably unintended but definitely protracted distraction, Kearsley gives Bobby one blue eye, à la Marilyn Manson. Sound design includes a somewhat menacing but also distracting metallic whirring. These are cosmetic annoyances that could be pruned from the production. The good character work far outweighs them.

The coyote of the title was shot by Bobby's idolized uncle and stuck on a fence to show mastery of and hatred for a predator. Has our criminal justice system treated the inmates similarly? Is execution merely public humiliation and an ostentatious display of death? Or will the act serve as an example and a warning to the remaining pack? This and other questions may long haunt this *Coyote's* audience.

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