

Coyote on a Fence (Theatre of Arts)



The scrappy little Theatre of Arts (now in Hollywood) has produced their first full-length play, *Coyote on a Fence* by Bruce Graham, a prison drama about men on death row in some small state that delights in executing prisoners.

John Brennan (Rob Nagle) is on death row for (probably, although he denies it) stomping to death a fellow drug dealer in a dispute. And since he has been there for years, **he assumes he won't** be put down anytime soon, so he edits the "Death Row Advocate," wherein inmates write some first-person-singular essays or just letters-of-complaint. The African-American killer, **Willie T**, has just been executed for some heinous acts against a twelve-year-old boy, and Bobby Reyburn (Cody Kearsley) has been moved into his cell. Bobby – convicted of a hugely mentally-disturbed act torching an African-American church, killing 37 people, including children. He admits his guilt, but says that "God" told him to do it. He has no remorse for his act and for his hatred of blacks and Jews as an "Aryan Warrior" in the Aryan Nation. John wants Bobby to write about his experiences, both before and after his wonton act of cruelty, but Bobby, essentially illiterate, undereducated and not accepting that what he did was evil (after all, "God" commanded him to do it), won't fight his upcoming execution.

This puts John into an emotionally-unstable place as he does not believe (nor does the playwright) in state-sanctioned murder. So his failing attempts to get Bobby – a cheerful sort of naif, with an odd eye – to agree to the appeals, really is Graham's play.

Attempting to understand how a prison can publish an anti-authority monthly, the New York Times sends down a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a Jewish man in his 30s, Sam Fried (Benjamin Cooper Mathes), to interview John, an act which John does not trust as the BBC had earlier done him up (irritating the warden) in an interview.

In the interchange between the reporter and the jailhouse editor, Graham's arguments are intelligently presented, as are those of one of the deputies, Shawna DuChaps (Lisa Valenzuela), who converses with an unseen questioner, where she challenges the public's right to know and how well she sleeps at night, unaware that her heavy drinking belies her stated confidence.

Director James Warwick, using a set of his own devising, has staged it adeptly, casting a younger graduate of his school (Kearlsey) and two of his faculty (Nagle and Mathes), as well as an outsider, (the talented Ms. Valenzuela). The arguments are clear, the staging is un-muddied and the decade-old play has resonance for today. How societies use the death penalty as a way of keeping order is – and always will be – arguable arguments, keeping the 85-minutes or so (no intermission) entertaining and with the actors – beginning with Rob Nagle as usual – and adding on Mathes, Valenzuela, and the younger Kearlsey – exhibiting such high standards, make these characters far more than just theatrical symbols. Each of these folk has weaknesses as well as strengths, and Warwick and Company make the most of what they've been given. It's a strong show, entertaining as well as informative.

However, a side note, if Theatre of Arts is going to keep renting the Arena Stage (in back of the Egyptian Theatre Complex), they're going to have to elevate the seating so no one will block the view from those behind. Just a thought.

Coyote on a Fence runs through September 15th, 2013, at Theatre of Arts, 1625 N. Las Palmas Avenue, Hollywood, CA 90028. Tickets: 323.463.2500 or at www.eventbrite.com/event/7690738205.