A master manipulator works all the angles in ‘The Atheist’

Georgia Lyman plays an unscrupulous journalist in “The Atheist.” (Photo: Kalman Zabarsky)

By Don Aucoin Globe Staff
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You can’t accuse Augustine Early, the bottom-feeding tabloid reporter in Ronan Noone’s “The Atheist,” of concealing her unscrupulous intentions. “My rules: Do whatever you have to do to get the story,” she proclaims.

Augustine certainly follows that amoral credo in an absorbingly spiky production of Noone’s 2006 solo play at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, directed and designed by the playwright himself.

Portrayed by Georgia Lyman, shouldering a role hitherto played by men, Augustine is not exactly the ideal advertisement for journalism at this exceptionally charged moment in the history of relations between
elected officials and the press. She systematically betrays anyone who makes the grave mistake of trusting
her as she schemes, lies, and blackmails her way to the only thing that matters: fame. ("See, I knew from a
young age I was going to be famous," she confides to the audience early on. "More famous than anybody I
ever knew.")

Part savage satire, part Faustian morality tale about the acquisition and misuse of power, "The Atheist"
registers today as a kind of parallel-universe map to the slippery slope we’re all on, when the brand-new
Trump administration has shown an eagerness to exploit the public’s lack of faith in the people who bring
them the news.

Noone, who teaches in BU’s graduate playwriting program, is the author of numerous fine dramas,
including “Brendan,” “Little Black Dress,” and his Baile Trilogy. “The Atheist” was first produced off-
Broadway in 2006, starring Chris Pine as Augustine, and later at Huntington Theatre Company with
Campbell Scott in the role.

I don’t think the gender switch significantly alters the experience of the play, except insofar as it affords
Lyman a chance to sink her teeth into a juicy role — always a welcome development. Attired as if for
combat in black boots, black pants, and a tomato-red jersey, the actress delivers a performance of
unrelenting, in-your-face fierceness that is in keeping with Noone’s sharply uncompromising, if sometimes
meandering, script.

As director, Noone makes heavy use of video to emphasize the dislocating sensation of living in an age that
is simultaneously information-saturated and fact-challenged, when the truth itself perpetually seems up for
grabs. The stage is strewn with crumpled newspapers, as if they are relics of a more factual time. The walls
are covered with the names of media entities (“Breitbart,” “Politico,” “Drudge,” “CNN”) and cynical
one-liners (“Who needs sources when it’s true?”).

Throughout the play Lyman’s performance is projected on a screen upstage, with multiple images of her
receding diagonally into the distance. In addition, the actress periodically bolts offstage and speaks into a
tripod-mounted video camera, forcing us to choose between watching her in the flesh or as a screen-
mediated self, in close-up. Adjacent to the stage is a freeze-frame image of Walter Cronkite; maybe it was
my imagination, but Uncle Walter’s lips seemed to be pursed in disapproval as he gazed down at the
proceedings.

Hey, can you blame him? The calculating Augustine violates every rule of journalism and basic decency
there is. She slants her coverage of a rape trial to benefit the accused, and when the accused is acquitted,
Augustine collects on her debt by enlisting him in a scheme as elaborate as it is diabolical. Always looking
for an angle, Augustine sells out her naïve lover, Jenny, in order to gain control over a powerful politician
who can benefit Augustine’s career (the politician is Jenny’s landlord, and he’s been secretly recording her
in intimate moments). Augustine’s next target is the politician’s wife, but there prove to be surprises in
store for the ostensibly heartless journalist.

All in all, the social mirror Noone holds up in “The Atheist” reflects almost nothing reassuring, only a
picture of a culture that has utterly lost its moorings. At the beginning of the BPT production, before
Lyman utters a word, she ferociously scrawls “I want you to get mad” on a blackboard. By the end, when
those same six words thunder from the screen, spoken by an actor in a movie that only seems more
prophetic with each passing year, it’s clear that it’s Noone’s takeaway message as well.
THE ATHEIST


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