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THEATER REVIEW: 'Rhinoceros' bellows its warning

Just when we've forgotten about Eugene Ionesco's absurdist play "Rhinoceros" and the lessons it has for us, suddenly we find ourselves in need of the play again. Fortunately, at this crucial time in history, Wesley Savick has decided to adapt the original script and direct a co-production of it by Suffolk University and Boston Playwrights' Theatre.



Matt Finn, Brian Bernhard, Robert Kropf, Jake Athyal and Laurie Riihimaki in Boston Playwrights' Theatre's "Rhinoceros," by Eugene Ionesco, adapted and directed by Wesley Savick. Courtesy Photo/Stratton McCrady

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"Rhinoceros" is about people abandoning their common sense and humanity to become rhinoceroses - thick skinned, bellowing, belligerent beasts, roaming as a mindless, dangerous pack, destroying whatever is in front of them. When the play was written in 1959, it was commonly seen as applying to the Nazis and how they swept Germany up into their nightmare vision of dominating the world. Naturally, you can apply the play's message to contemporary issues in whatever way that works for you. But it was clear from the talk-back session after Saturday's press opening that Savick and others saw the play speaking specifically to one of the main stories at the center of our Presidential primaries.

Savick has retained the story elements of Ionesco's play, while adapting references in order to set the play in contemporary Boston, and updating and pruning the language, so the show moves at a much faster clip. All of this makes the play far more accessible to today's audiences.

The play opens by introducing us to two of the main characters, Berenger (Nael Nacer) and Jean (Alex Pollock). They are scheduled to meet at a Newbury Street café. Berenger, who's always late, dashes breathlessly to get there, running down one of the rows of audience members, as if he's a late theatergoer, and up onto the bare two-level stage. When needed, chairs are thrown up onto the stage. The always-punctual Jean arrives intentionally late so he can be on time, Berenger's time. Jean is fastidiously dressed, while Berenger is disheveled. As Jean rips into him, you may well wonder why they are friends.

Everything in the opening acts should be interpreted in terms of what's to come. One would think that Jean would be far more capable than Berenger of standing up to the herd mentality of the rhinoceroses, but you will eventually see that's not what Ionesco thought.

Soon a couple of rhinoceroses have run down the street, creating a great deal of horror among the crowd at the café, including the café owner and his waitress, a shop owner and his wife, and a logic teacher and his student. Ionesco obviously doesn't think people are very skillful at facing herd mentality. Berenger doesn't think much has happened, except a lot of dust. The logicians' crazy discussion shows how little their logic and reasoning have to offer. And when one lady's cat is trampled by a rhino, she's so obsessed with the dead cat that she can't see what's happening to the whole city.

The first scene is highly stylized. Jean speaks with long, unnatural pauses between words, and people stomp their feet in unison at the rhinos. It's a bit like a dance or circus at times. After the show, Savick acknowledged that the first act functions like a balsa glider—it flies, but you can't put much weight on it. As the play progresses, the acting style becomes intentionally more realistic and I think more engaging.

In a scene set in a newspaper office where Berenger works, we see how others respond to or theorize about the growing number of rhinos around them. We never really see anyone dressed as a rhinoceros, and that subtlety is the charm of the play. We certainly hear and see people's shock at seeing the beasts, we hear them talk fearfully about them, and flashing lights and enormous roars make us feel like the rhinos are nearby. In one of the hit scenes of the play we watch Jean slowly transform into a rhino as Berenger tries to persuade him to call a doctor.

Pollock is terrific in this scene as his body begins to twist and contort, his hands start to take the shape of hooves, his voice rumbles like a rhino's, until you almost can't understand it, and he rips off his pajama tops, feeling constrained by them. Meanwhile he argues strongly against Berenger's concerns and increasingly reasons from an animal's perspective.

This scene and the rest of the play are totally gripping. Berenger is terribly afraid that he will become a rhinoceros and wears a bandage on his forehead, hoping to prevent the emergence of a tusk. His co-worker, Stinger (Brian Bernhard) describes with brutal honesty what their friends had actually been like, making them vulnerable to becoming rhinos.

The show closes with a very moving and beautifully written scene between Berenger and his girlfriend Daisy, as they assume they are the last humans left on the earth. Nacer as Berenger is terrific throughout the play, as he always is. He's an emotional chameleon who adapts to every moment and scene very naturally and honestly. He's mesmerizing to watch throughout this show. Raya Malcolm, who plays Daisy, is a senior at Suffolk University. She brings a wonderful tenderness, vulnerability, and uncertainty to the final scene.

This show will cause you to think deeply about the rhinos around you and what it takes to resist becoming one. Meanwhile watch for hints of their horns in the show.

“Rhinoceros”

WHEN: Through March 13

WHERE: The Modern Theatre, 525 Washington St., Boston

TICKETS: \$30

INFO: 866-811-4111; www.bostonplaywrights.org

<http://cambridge.wickedlocal.com/article/20160229/ENTERTAINMENT/160226161>