



'Butterfly' at Wanderlust Theater Lab by Jessica Dall

Posted on **February 15, 2013** by **Jessica Dall**



Walking into the Takoma Park Community Center Theater, it's possible to tell right away that there is something unsettling about Tom Block's new play, *Butterfly*, directed by Roselie Vasquez-Yetter, who also provided the set design.

The stage, done up as a convincing living room, is bathed in red light, dark abstract art hangs both around the stage and audience, and a cellist plays minor staccato notes somewhere off behind the audience. The paintings that are part of the set are by playwright Tom Block's series called *In the Garden of the Mystical Redoubt*. Fully immersed, high hopes rise for a likewise engrossing play to start.



- Todd (Michael Mack), Abs (Karim Chaibi), Martini (Anika Harden), Jan (Stephen Backus), and Gertie (Gigi Buscaglio) share a moment onstage together.

Photo by Tom Block.

A new play to the scene—its first reading being less than six months ago—*Butterfly* explores the final day of Todd (Michael Mack), a self-appointed prophet who left a promising professional baseball career to explore his “calling”. Joined by a cast of characters who may or may not be imaginary, Todd attempts to complete his book outlining his doomsday prophecies.

From the first line, it is possible to see *Butterfly* intends to stretch its actors’ ranges. Mack’s opening dialogue takes place with an unseen, malevolent “Therapist” (Josh Canary) speaking in nonsense and metaphors. Characters switch from being invisible, to seen, to invisible by others on the stage. One, Jan (Stephen Backus), adapts into an entirely different person—his entire demeanor changing in a way that is amazingly believable. With all these absurdist changes, the cast does an amazing job as a whole, Mack wavering along that fine line between cold cruelty and calm magnanimity, his mother, Gertie (Gigi Buscaglio) swinging from sympathetic to hard, Canary managing to be ever present—and sometimes terrifying—without ever stepping onto the stage.

The absurdism of the script, however, is—at best—a double-edged sword. Where the switches allow for some instances of brilliant acting, the clunkiness of forced metaphors and interspersed dialogue sometimes overwhelms the actors, leaving the words feeling flat and the overall point absent. Martini (Anika Harden) left with some of the most awkward dialogue is perhaps the greatest example of this—shining in some of her simpler moments, and then bogged down and awkward when the words she needs to say can’t quite feel natural.

Butterfly’s biggest breakout star, however, is one that never says a word, cellist Desiree Miller. The composer of *Butterfly*’s score, Miller plays throughout the performance, setting the scene, backing up actors as they shine or struggle, and providing a brilliantly written and performed background for everything *Butterfly* attempts to be.

All in all, *Butterfly* is a play that seems bound to have its ups and downs. Some dialogue is great, some is awkward; some moments are powerful, some fall flat; parts work, and then others fail. Still, for fans of post-modern performances, *Butterfly* provides an interesting look into madness, truth, religion, and death joined by good acting and direction, and an amazing musical score, which makes for a good night out at the theatre.



— Desiree Miller, Cellist. Photo courtesy of Wanderlust Theater Lab.