

Butterfly

February 19, 2013 By [Tim Treanor](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

Butterfly is a story about the prophet Todd (Michael Mack), son of the prophet Jules (Ken Jackson), on the last day of his life.



Gigi Buscaglio as Gertie and Ken Jackson as Jules (Photo: Courtesy of Wanderlust Theater Lab)

Todd lives with his mother (Gigi Buscaglio) and has but a single follower, a nervous young Serbian refugee called Jan (Stephen Backus), yet he is supernally arrogant. “Worship me,” he instructs his miserable young acolyte, and Jan does his best to comply. When his mother acidly points out that the great prophet has never actually held a job, the lordly Todd replies, “just set the table, mother.”

So Todd will not be confused with the Dali Lama; and when the folks settle into the Vatican next month to pick the new Pope he is unlikely to be near the top of the list. He does, however, have an uncanny ability of conjure the dead. For example, his father, who left the family to become a street preacher, and later, a guest of a Pouoghkeepsie, New York mental institution before dying ten years ago, comes to visit. So does the great 11th-centur scientist, Sultan Ibn Sina (Karim Chaibi, doing nicely in his stage debut).

Todd the Prophet also — perhaps unwillingly — makes a hairdresser, Martini (Anika Harden) and a postal carrier (Cody Jones) appear. These visitations from the invisible universe may explain why the Prophet Todd sees a therapist (Josh Canary, bellowing his lines from the back of the auditorium).

“The days of visitation are come, the days of recompense are come;” holy Scripture says, “Israel shall know it, the prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad.” (Hosea 9:7). Prophecy is almost by definition heresy, and perhaps madness as well; if a truth were evident through logic and – I don’t know, focus groups – the gift of prophecy would be redundant. So playwright Tom Block, a visual artist and a scholar whose well-received first play, *White Noise*, is scheduled for production at the Theater for the New City in New York, raises some provocative questions with his second play.



Michael Mack as Todd and Stephen Bockus as Jan (Photo courtesy of Wanderlust Theater Lab)

Regrettably, the fledgling Wanderlust Theater Lab does not do full justice to Block’s provocation. A large part of the problem is that Mack, a last-minute replacement for an actor who became ill, is forced to resort performing book in hand. Mack has a wonderful voice and appears to be a highly competent actor, but the fact that he is reading his lines from the script in front of him is a significant interruption of the fictive dream.

And, unfortunately, the rest of the cast lacks the timing and naturalness necessary to make the play convincing. Unless a play is composed exclusively of serial speeches, one actor’s line must take up the moment the previous actor’s line finishes, and if characters interrupt each other it must be out of passion, not awkwardness. In the production I saw, the cast groped its way through the lines as though director Roselie Vasquez-Yetter had not rehearsed them enough. Even worse, they reach peak emotional moments – tears, shouts of anger, and the like – without sufficient buildup, and as though they are responding to a cue, rather than authentically to the circumstances. I specifically exempt Ken Jackson – who is absolutely marvelous – from these observations.

Block deserves some of the responsibility for the production’s shortcomings as well. He has taken dangerous risks with the fourth wall, inviting his characters to comment (critically) on the play. As far as I can tell, Martini and the postal carrier do not serve the play in any identifiable way; Martini carries on a romance with Sultan Ibn Sina (who she calls “Abs”), which may work to the Sultan’s advantage, but not the play’s.

Somewhat Recommended

Butterfly

Closes February 23, 2013

Takoma Park Community Center Theater

7500 Maple Ave.

Takoma Park, MD 20912

1 hour, 45 minutes with 1 intermission

Tickets: \$20

Friday and Saturday

[Details and tickets](#)

Block provides Todd with a backstory – as a bonus baby for the Baltimore Orioles – which is at least as interesting as his present predicament; but if the playwright has his audience wondering how his protagonist fell from the major leagues to having a one-person congregation instead of paying attention to the action on stage, it is not a good thing. And Block stuffs his play with absurdities, like early Christopher Durang.

Butterfly is imperfect, but it is the product of a developing playwright and deep thinker who has already succeeded in a different medium and is in the process of defining an aesthetic which may have an impact on theater in the future. (The stage is festooned with his art, and the *superb* cellist Desiree Miller plays her original compositions throughout the production.)

If you seek only to be entertained this is probably not for you; if you'd like to explore where theater will be ten years from now it is probably worth a look.

Butterfly by Tom Block . Directed by Roselie Vasquez-Yetter . Featuring Anika Harden, Michael Mack, Ken Jackson, Josh Canary, Gigi Buscaglio, Stephen Backus, Karim Chaibi, Cody Jones. With an original cello score by Desiree Miller, who performs it live . Produced by Wanderlust Theater Lab . Reviewed by Tim Treanor

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