

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mr. Wolf Stalks South Coast Repertory

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015

In yet another play that is full of anguishing questions that don't have ready answers, playwright Rajiv Joseph (*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*) tackles one of the darker issues of our time: abducted children.

What causes such things to happen and how do we deal with them when/if they do happen?

Joseph is a sensitive writer who handles language well and who understands, as he points out, that theatre is there to pose the query, not to provide the answer. He wants us to *think* as well as feel. Fair enough. In his play, *Mr. Wolf*, currently on the Julianne Argyros Stage at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, he takes us deep into the world of people whose children were kidnapped.

The play is not gruesome, even if the subject matter arouses fear, revulsion and certainly compassion. It is a carefully thought-out dissection of the damage done, not only to the children involved, but also to the devastated parents and ultimately to the perpetrators. Why would anyone do such a terrible thing? In *Mr. Wolf*'s case, the perpetrator is to be presumed delusional, as perhaps they all are.

What is different in this plot is that Theresa (Emily James), the 15-year-old girl who is eventually recovered by police and her parents after having been abducted at the age of three, was not physically abused by her kidnapper, a community college professor with delusions of prophecy and purity who sees in this child a kind of world savior. But if Mr. Wolf (John de Lancie), as this professor calls himself, treated this girl with a level of compassion and even a kind of detached affection, the same is not true for all of his victims.

The point of the play is to look — unscientifically — into the kind of mental aberrations that provoke aberrant acts, and while the play works well as an alert and alarm in displaying the long, wide reach of damage done, it is more of an illustration of what happens than an expostulation.



Tessa Auberjonois and Jon Tenney in *Mr. Wolf*.

In that sense, and as a viable slice of unfortunate life, Joseph's play adds a welcome element of mystery and builds carefully into the full-fledged tragedy that is eventually uncovered. It certainly grabs and holds our interest, if not always our emotions. Oddly (intentionally?), what is lacking is a level of humanity. It is as if the illustration were conducted with stock characters — the desperate

father, Michael (Jon Tenney), driven to a form of organized distraction in his determination to find his daughter; the divorced mother, Hana (Tessa Auberjonois), who fled to Vancouver to escape the tragedy and her husband's obsession with finding a child she felt would never be found; and yet another player, Julie (Kwana Martinez), the distraught mother of her own abducted child, desperately lost in her past and impulsively married by Michael, not out of love so much as an extension of his zealotry in a determination to help her find her vanished daughter.



Jon Tenney and Kwana Martinez in *Mr. Wolf*.

As directed by South Coast Rep co-founder David Emmes, the production is physically sharp (Nephtelie Andonyadis' sets are appropriately neutral, and the astronomy maps attributed to young Theresa, are simply beautiful). The same applies to Leah Piehl's costumes, Lap Chi Chu's lighting and Cricket S. Myers' sound design. The impersonality of the surroundings seems to reflect lives so broken that the people in them are simply inured to what's around them.

The actors all embrace their roles with the emotions allotted to each, an allotment that, despite the innate heat of the topic, includes a good deal of emotional distance. There is a coldness to the totality of the production, as if we are meant to look at the events but not touch, because to do so might be unbearably painful.

And that may well be Joseph's intent. But isn't theatre the place where we are prepared to surrender to our deepest emotions? The place where we want to *feel* everything? Process everything? There is no catharsis here. This *Mr. Wolf* leaves us feeling more numb than moved — as if engaged in watching the solving of a complex equation rather than the unraveling of a dreadfully human drama, the outcome of which, once this child is found, has yet to play itself out.

The end, alas, is only the beginning. Perhaps that is the lesson.



l-r, Tessa Auberjonois, Jon Tenney, Emily James and John de Lancie in *Mr. Wolf*.

Top Image: Emily James and John de Lancie in Mr. Wolf

All photos by Debora Robinson/SCR

WHAT: *Mr. Wolf*

WHERE: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

WHEN: Tuesday-Fridays, 7:45pm; Saturdays-Sundays, 2 & 7:45pm (NO evening show May 3). Ends May 3. ASL interpreted May 2 @ 2pm.

HOW: Tickets start at \$22, available @ www.scr.org, or by phone @ 714.708.5555, or in person @ the theatre box office.

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