

THE THEATRE

CLOWNS OF CATASTROPHE

Two shows pit silliness against suffering.

BY JOHN LAHR



I have seen actors walk off the set. I have seen audiences walk out of the theatre. But not until Christopher Durang's "Why Torture Is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them" (at the Public) have I seen a playwright walk out on his own play. "I don't like this. I don't like what's happened," the ingénue Felicity (Laura Benanti) says, near the finale, having spent most of the evening desperately trying to enlist the help of her reactionary parents in getting an annulment of her marriage to Zamir (Amir Arison), a Middle Eastern stranger whom she married after a drunken one-night stand, and whom she thinks might be a terrorist. "There's no way I can imagine a positive outcome from this. I don't want to be part of it," Felicity adds, and we feel her pain.

The problem here is that Durang can't decide whether he's writing a sa-

tire or a sitcom. He has erected a farcical house of cards that can't stand up. There's a mad mother downstairs, and a pistol-packing father upstairs, practicing a little extraordinary rendition of his own. There's blood and body parts. There are sight gags and wacky vigilantes. There's even a minister with a sideline in pornography ("a porn-again Christian"). The director, Nicholas Martin, who knows his way around comedy and has worked with Durang before, seems unwilling or unable to restrain the author from behaving like the school cutup who thinks he's the smartest kid in the class. Martin gives the production a bright look and a perky tempo, but the crispness of the staging only underscores the laziness of the writing. At one point, Zamir asks to meet Felicity's parents. "How about never? Is never good for you?" she answers, a line pur-

loined from Robert Mankoff's well-known *New Yorker* cartoon.

As a satirist, Durang doesn't have the renegade chops; as a comedian, he doesn't know quite where to take aim. He wants to tee off on torture, right-wing paranoia, and conservative fear-mongering, but in humor, as in golf, the follow-through is as important as the swing, and Durang can't get any distance with his potshots. "John Yoo from the Justice Department wrote a torture memo that says that it isn't torture unless it causes organ failure," Felicity's father, Leonard (Richard Poe), says, just before he manacles Zamir to a chair in his upstairs armory. "And even if it does that, as long as the President says the words 'war on terror,' it's A-O.K." The line has no spin, no payoff, no news. Four years ago, before the Obama Presidency, the joke might have been provocative; now it seems as fresh as beef jerky.

Durang lacks the skill to carry his political outrage to a conclusion that is appropriately vicious and vivacious. He writes himself into a narrative and emotional impasse, from which retreat is the only option. So, at the eleventh hour—or so it seems—Durang rewinds the plot that he has never mastered, imposes new rules on a game he refuses to play, and, instead of pursuing the grotesque, goes for giggles. The evening ends with the cast foxtrotting to the thirties anthem "Dancing in the Dark": an ironic image that is supposed to play as a statement about a blinkered Republican America but that says more about the beleaguered playwright, who wants to have his cake and not eat it, too.

The evening's one consistent delight is Kristine Nielsen, who plays Luella, Felicity's dithering, theatre-obsessed, put-upon mother, and whose mugging steals what there is of the show. With her pearl choker and her tweedy, ample frame, Nielsen looks like she just stepped out of a Helen Hokinson cartoon. Blond bangs and high cheekbones set off her big almond eyes, which seem constantly to wander toward a reality that only she can see. "You know, darling, I don't like to discuss what happens at night," she says, about her conjugal life. "That's private, and it's unspeakable." She adds, "I don't even talk about it to myself." Nielsen invests Luella with a sort of baffled alertness. "Your father is pro-life, did you know that?" she tells Felicity, at one point,

Ménage à quatre: Poe, Benanti, Arison, and Nielsen in Christopher Durang's new play.

adding, in fluting tones, “He loves all those stem-cell things. . . . Wants to give them the right to vote, just about. . . . Wants to register them as Republicans.” Durang has used Nielsen in other plays; he knows how to pitch his lines to her particular comic strength—Luella is a bundle of wild eccentricity trying vainly to wrestle itself into conventional form. “You know, I don’t really know what normal is,” she says. “That’s one of the reasons I go to theatre.” In one of her zany digressions, Luella asks Felicity what plays she has seen. “I’ve seen a hundred plays by Martin McDonagh, I’ve seen two hundred plays by David Hare, and three hundred plays each by Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn and Michael Frayn,” Felicity replies. “Are Americans not writing plays anymore?” Luella asks. It’s a question better put to the author.

If you want to get high on the fumes of desolation—the giddy, furtive, theatrical equivalent of sniffing glue—then “The Toxic Avenger” (well directed by John Rando, at New World Stages) is probably goofy enough to get you there. With a book and lyrics by Joe DiPietro and music and lyrics by David Bryan (based on Lloyd Kaufman’s 1984 film of the same name), the show opens with gleeful bad tidings of the horror to come: the news is so traumatic, we are told, that a registered nurse is stationed in the lobby; what’s more, the audience is urged, “For the love of God, do *not* turn off your cell phones.” New Jersey, it seems, is choking to death, and only one man—Melvin Ferd the Third (Nick Cordero)—can save it from political corruption and environmental disaster. Set amid the ugly clutter of oil drums and the haze of industrial smog—the first number begins with a cough—“The Toxic Avenger” gives nihilism a good night out. In a delirium of decay, the show checks every box on the barbarity short list: Murder, Mutants, Disembowelling, Severed Limbs, Rape, Transvestism, Police and Political Corruption, Oprah. You want it, you got it! And, of course, the list wouldn’t be complete without Mocking a Handicap. The love interest here is a blind librarian called Sarah (Sara Chase), who can’t see how many blind jokes the musical makes at her expense. (Twenty-three is the charm.) Hey, it’s a cruel, cruel

world even in adolescent-musical land.

The songs set the acrylic tone: “Thank God She’s Blind,” “Evil Is Hot,” “Bitch/Slut/Liar/Whore,” “Choose Me, Oprah,” and, my favorite, “Hot Toxic Love,” during which Sarah tries to throw herself into the arms of the buff, green Melvin Ferd—he’s been dumped into industrial waste by the mayor’s thugs and transformed from geek to freak—and misses her slimy beloved by a mile, continuing the song in the wings. (Stephen Sondheim, eat your sour heart out!) Let the record show that DiPietro and Bryan manage to rhyme “macho” with “gaspacho.” The fun they had writing the score certainly communicates itself. In “Who Will Save New Jersey?,” for instance, Melvin and a passing nun (natch) give New York City a pimp-slapping:

Now listen up, Manhattan—
We know you’re stinkin’ rich!
Your bedsheets may be satin
But Jersey’s not your bitch!

DiPietro and Bryan are equal-opportunity offenders. In “The Legend of the Toxic Avenger,” they send up both New Jersey’s Bruce Springsteen and their own ludicrous plot:

Lemme tell ya a story ‘bout
A man with a strange complexion.
He killed a lotta folks
And made a love connection.

Under Rando’s direction, “The Toxic Avenger” is a sort of one-stop shop for every piece of vaudeville shtick. Nancy Opel, who plays more characters in this show than Roseanne has personalities, has a field day with a hilarious quick-change routine. And the hardworking, talented ensemble, including Demond Green and Matthew Saldivar, have the audience whooping it up as they whirl in drag behind Opel, like Tina Turner and the Ikettes. In fact, the show is really a kind of St. Vitus’ dance, a manifestation of our culture’s death-haunted hysteria. It registers the fury of helplessness and offers in response only the impotence of invective. At the finale, the new governor of New Jersey, Ferd the Third, stands before us, with his blind wife and his green baby, and sings:

The first bill that I plan to pass—
Pollute the earth and I’ll kick your ass!

On the way out, I noticed people selling T-shirts that read “Totally Toxic.” My guess is that that will be the title of the sequel. ♦