

## KILLING TIME

*The dark side of hope, in plays by Adam Rapp and Craig Wright.*

BY JOHN LAHR



In one of the major avant-garde performances of the late nineteen-sixties, the actors of the Living Theatre used to run almost naked through startled Off Broadway audiences, bleating about not being able to travel without a passport. Forget passports: in the bloodcurdling, apocalyptic landscape of Adam Rapp's new play, "Through the Yellow Hour" (directed by the author, at the Rattlestick), you can't travel without a hazmat suit, a gas mask, and a lethal weapon in your pocket. You can't even get to your seat without being "accounted for" and stamped on the neck. It's tough out there in Rapp's sweltering dystopia. Machine-gun fire. Helicopters hovering. Ex-

plosions. Deranged survivors scavenging a bombed-out New York City. The baddies are called the Egg Heads—for their futuristic helmets, not their brainpower—and, believe me, they are into some serious carnage. We're talking germ warfare, castration, and "penises arranged on necklaces." The raggedy dead lie around like dust balls in corners. And the smell, the dirt—my God! Fat City has turned into Fetid City. People don't bathe for weeks. (Lucky for them that the action takes place in the only railroad flat in the East Village with a bathtub in the living room.) Everyone who comes through the double-locked steel door brings news of absurd life and absurd

death. Things have gone way beyond dog-eat-dog; it's now man-eat-man.

For twenty minutes before the play begins, a woman's body lies face down on the floor beside the bathtub. Then a huge shadowy figure—bearded, gas-masked, and filthy—looms into view on the fire escape outside a blown-out window upstage and lowers himself into the room. He (Brian Mendes) is hulking, threadbare, demented, and terrifying. He looks around the room and starts to shout in Portuguese. The dead woman (Hani Furstenberg) springs to life and grabs a gun from the mantelpiece. She fires at the jabbering figure, who sings and lurches at her with a crowbar. They tussle. She blasts him again. Laughing and singing, he dies at her feet. She's covered in his blood, but she's alive. Welcome to Rapp's nightmare. The scene encapsulates his paradoxical goal: to create an atmosphere of death-in-life in order to arrive at its opposite, a sense of life-in-death.

The woman's name is Ellen, and her husband, Paul, has been missing since he went out to forage for food, fifty-two days ago. A pediatric nurse, Ellen is the play's great white hope with noir dialogue. "You're just gonna leave him there?" a drug-addicted refugee named Maude (Danielle Slavick) asks, noticing the dead intruder, as she pulls her infant daughter from a knapsack and hands her over to Ellen in exchange for a safe place to stay. "He adds texture to the room," says Ellen, who has not only an improbable collection of wisecracks but an improbable stash of drugs to barter with. Asked what she had to trade to get her gun, Ellen says, "A case of canned sardines, a DVD of 'Last Tango in Paris,' our flat-screen TV, my engagement ring, and some tasteless sexual acts." Dramatically speaking, this demonstrates, if nothing else, that even in cataclysm you can meet cute.

Ellen seems to have no trouble procuring whatever the plot needs from the perilous world outside: the gun, the cupboard full of drugs, an endless supply of canned peaches, a fourteen-year-old black boy named Darius (the excellent Vladimir Versailles), for whom she trades the white female baby. What she really wants is a sexually potent male with whom to conceive a child of her own. Hakim (Alok Tewari), who staggers unbidden into the apartment to tell her in graphic detail how he and her husband were tortured and how he was

*Apocalypse now: Hani Furstenberg as a survivor in "Through the Yellow Hour."*

forced to slit Paul's throat, is inspected, then rejected for procreative purposes.

Darius, unlike the rest of the males in the play, is untainted by nihilism or other infectious diseases; he's an innocent reared in the pristine arcadian world of Mrs. Winship's Farm, where "genetically robust" *Homo sapiens* babies are grown, and blacks are harvested for menial duties. After some folderol with Mrs. Winship's emissaries—"Where did you guys fly in from, Bergdorf's?" Ellen says to the well-dressed Claire (Joanne Tucker), an unflappable executive who wraps herself in a biohazard cape, like a Ziegfeld girl in feathers—Ellen is left alone with her nervous boy toy. Before long, she has stripped and is sitting in the bath, beckoning him to join her. Rather like the Owl and the Pussycat setting off to sea, they sit facing each other in the tub. "Now repeat after me, O.K., Darius?" Ellen says. "I'm about to change the world. The world is going to be a better place."

Despite the play's mountain of narrative improbabilities and inconsistencies, Rapp is a natural storyteller; for a hundred minutes, his ruthless, ravaged caricatures of catastrophe manage to hold our attention with their sense of cultural doom. Hope, Rapp seems to be saying, dies last.

In Craig Wright's murky "Grace" (directed by Dexter Bullard, at the Cort), hope dies first: gunshots ring out and the curtain rises to reveal two people dead on the floor of a Florida condo and a man holding a pistol to his own head. The play then rewinds from this hellish end to its pious beginnings. The man with the gun is Steven (Paul Rudd), a committed Christian and real-estate entrepreneur, whose act of murder is an act of nostalgia—an attempt to deny reality and to reclaim time. "I want to go back, Sara!" he says to his wife, before plugging her.

"Everything absolute belongs to pathology," Nietzsche said. Steven's behavior is Exhibit A. He moves from Minneapolis to Florida, enticed by the offer of nine million dollars to start a Christian hotel chain. Cloaking his greed in paeans to God's glory, he is a master of what Dr. Johnson called "the secret ambush of a specious prayer": "Keep carrying us forward, Lord, always forward, deeper and deeper into your grace," Steven prays, when it looks like the deal has been clinched. He is insensitive, selfish, and credulous; when he lists some of the mooted names for his

string of hotels—the Upper Rooms, the New RESTament, the Jew Drop Inn—it becomes clear that he's also a fool.

"I'm not a knower, I'm a believer," Steven says proudly at one point. But he won't—or can't—believe that Sara (Kate Arrington) loves their neighbor, the disfigured, dyspeptic, and agnostic Sam (Michael Shannon), who has worn a mask over half his face ever since a car accident killed his wife and grotesquely scarred him. In the course of a series of neighborly visits, the lonely Sara finds in Sam the intelligence and the attention that are lacking in her marriage. The eponymous moment of grace is her fleeting marital betrayal. She reaches over and removes Sam's mask. She sees him; she prays with him; then she kisses him. The embrace registers as something spiritual to both parties. But to Steven it is an intolerable breach of Sara's sacramental vows, which puts paid to his belief in "universal love." Sara tells him she wants out of their marriage. "No way does God do that to a person," he replies. He would rather annihilate his world and himself than face the idea that another, valid reality exists.

Wright, who earned a master's degree in divinity before becoming a successful TV writer (for "Six Feet Under," "Lost," and "Dirty Sexy Money," which he also created), was last represented on the New York stage by the hilarious, superbly written 2010 play "Mistakes Were Made." "Grace," however, is slick and unsatisfying. Within seconds, we know the play's outcome; within minutes, we know the characters' psychology. All that remains is to fit the pieces together. The night I saw the play, some of the pagans in the audience were sufficiently bemused by the evening to stay afterward for a Q. & A. session with the cast, moderated by two thirtyish resident theologians from New York 1 and *Playbill*. Among the spiritual issues they seemed keen to probe were: Whom did Paul Rudd model his character on? What did it feel like for Ed Asner (who plays a German-born exterminator) to be back on Broadway? How did the play get to Broadway? After a few minutes of these hermeneutics, I'd had enough. I walked away from the Cort lobbing up my own little prayer to the starless sky. It went like this: "O Lord of the Rialto, rain down bawdry not Buber, invention not pretension, clarity not cleverness. For God's sake. Amen." ♦