

Fragile

Arcola Theatre
4 - 29 September 2007

Written by
Tena Stivicic

Directed by
Michael Gieleta

Designed by
James Macnamara

Lighting by
John Terry

Sound Design by
Christopher James

Musical Supervision by
Russell Hepplewhite

Voicework by
William Trotter

Cast:
Catherine Cusack
Joseph Garton
Georgiana James
Edward Kingham
Rayisa Kondracki
Stella Maris
John Moraitis

"Fragile!" explores the ways an ex-Yugoslavian immigrant survives in contemporary London. It concerns Mila, an aspiring young actress from Croatia and Marko, a Serbian stand-up comedian, who both live and work in a bar owned by Michi, (a small-time Bulgarian gangster). Mila is dating Erik, a Norwegian journalist who spent some time in Bosnia during the recent war. This relationship is threatened when his ex-lover, Tiasha - a sex-trafficking victim - arrives in London seeking asylum. Gayle, a New Zealand born aspiring artist who also works for the government, helps her.

Tena Stivicic was born in Zagreb, Croatia and this is the British premier of *Fragile!* which has won several awards at various Croatian Theatre festivals. The script deals with the weighty subjects of war, sex-trafficking and drug abuse with a light comic touch that avoids self-righteousness and cliché. At times, however, the words are too heavy for the script. Gayle's speech in scene 13 for instance, seems awkward:

"I swear this city will eventually sink with all these worn out dreams holding by their teeth" It may be that some of it does not translate into English or the playwright simply got carried away.

Director Michael Gieleta's dynamic staging and fluid scene changes - crucial in a two-hour production with no interval - overcome the limited space of the Arcola Theatre. The venue was perfect for the seedy underground atmosphere of Michi's basement bar. A strong cast led by Catherine Cusack put on gripping performances. As Tiasha, Cusack manages to convey immense suffering and strength with no self-indulgence. In scene six when describing her enforced prostitution she says:

"First I just lie there and wait to be over. Then I understand if I do effort it can be much more easy and much more quick."

Her transformation at the end of the play from victim to predator is remarkable and entirely believable. Stella Maris is wonderful as Marta, the joking, singing, widowed cleaner. John Moraitis adds warmth and depth to the potentially stock character of Michi the gangster.

Edward Kingham gave a standout performance as the troubled drug-taking journalist, by turns menacing and vulnerable. The beautiful Rayisa Kondracki was enchanting as Mila - a perfect modern-day Chekhovian Nina - while Joseph Garton's Marko provides the essential comedy with deft precision. The electricity between the Bosnian and Croatian flatmates, Marko and Mila, was palpable though some of the scenes between Marko and Gayle were flat. The picnic on the floor in scene seven for example, was lifted considerably with the entrance of Mila. This may improve during the course of the run, when the director irons out the problems evident on opening night.

Although the average theatregoer will have little first-hand experience of forced prostitution or the reality of war, collectively the characters' experiences - from the sex-slave to the failed New Zealand artist - are accessible and moving. Tena Stivicic paints the spectrum of human experience, from the banal to the unimaginable. This reviewer left the theatre emotionally and intellectually satisfied.

Edward Glass

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