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'Jekyll' at Playhouse good and evil

Theater review

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Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?

Playwright Jeffrey Hatcher and director Ed Stern, that's who.

Playhouse in the Park closes its current season with Hatcher's nifty, thriller-diller re-look at Victorian favorite "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Hatcher's unexpected approach is matched by Stern, who sets it all as black on black, with lots of splashes of bright, suitably melodramatic red.

Like last year's "Around the World in 80 Days," a small, admirable cast takes on a variety of roles to push a Victorian era adventure forward, although instead of going global, "Jekyll" has vastly more unknowable terrain – the human mind.

This is a different take on the classic tale of a split personality, with Anthony Marble the brilliant, well-liked and even noble-looking scientist Jekyll who is future-thinking enough to believe that behavior is not defined by good and evil, but by chemistry.

It takes four actors to play Hyde, he who commits unthinkable deeds, some of which are shocking enough to disturb even a 21st century audience.

Three actors (Anderson Matthews, Scott Schafer and Kyle Fabel) and an actress (Bernadette Quigley) each get to play that part of Hyde that dominates in the moment, and that can change from moment to moment, usually illustrated by the transfer of Jekyll's walking stick from one to the next. So, for instance, when Hyde approaches Elizabeth (Katie Fabel) to whom he is attracted, while all four jostle to see which will win the moment, it is the softest element of his ever-dangerous personality, embodied by Bernadette Quigley, that initially gains her confidence. Elizabeth is also an unexpected heroine – a working class girl who knows what's what and doesn't care.

But I get ahead of myself.

Picture an industrial-feeling backdrop of what look like opaque windows – there's no seeing into any of them. In front is a red door, the kind we know has no good behind it.

The play begins with a pair of gentlemen, friends of Jekyll's, sharing a strange anecdote, and unknowingly embarking on a stranger adventure that not everyone will survive. As they happen onto a nearby backstreet they remind us that we don't always know what's very close to home.

With bits of furnishings the action moves from upper-crust rooms to a hospital surgery to less swank accommodations. Underlining everything is light, beautifully designed by Thomas Hase, with bolts of color that come from here and there and, even more powerfully, takes the stage to pitch black.

"Jekyll and Hyde" is also an intellectual adventure, and there is a lot of talking – but, like last year's "Crime and Punishment" (and "80 Days") it makes me grateful that contemporary theater artists are finding ways to meld that world with ours to create vastly entertaining and thought-provoking theater.

"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," through May 22, Playhouse in the Park Marx Theatre, 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com

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