

“DIRTY STORY”  
by John Patrick Shanley

Review submitted by Rachel Cassidy – January 28, 2007

“Dirty Story,” a lyrical, verbal, physical, psychological battle for Middle Eastern supremacy, receives as splendid a production any theatre piece not in the mainstream could hope for. As conceived by Pulitzer, Oscar, Tony, Drama Desk award winner, John Patrick Shanley (of “Moonstruck” and “Doubt” fame), the timeless struggle between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, sired by Father Abraham and out of Sarah and Hagar, respectively, are here embodied by Brutus and Wanda. They are locked in a battle that has no resolution but which scars and damages the combatants nearly to death, and hauls the audience along as it evinces laughter, fright, recognition and helplessness.

The third component of Shanley’s quartet is Frank, frankly “Amurrican,” and with not too much subtlety, is our current president, who swaggers in cowboy garb, speaks in a Texas drawl, totes and sells guns and cigarettes and provides money to warring parties everywhere. The fourth character is Watson, subservient to Frank, sycophantic, reluctant participant, British accented, also, not at all vaguely hinted at, Tony Blair.

On a set that is seemingly haphazard, slightly claustrophobic and very clever, it reflects the tension, threat, illogic and chaos of its inhabitants. When the set itself plays as active a role on a stage as this one does, it is a breathtaking signal of superb direction and technical artistry.

Sotirios Livaditis is Brutus. With consummate skill, range and flair, his Brutus embodies all the history, frustrations, angers and hopelessness of current day Palestine. Frozen by cynicism and despair into inaction, despite his obvious brilliance, Brutus embarks on a systematic endeavor to eliminate Wanda, in the ultimate sibling rivalry. Livaditis never lets down for an instant. He stalks, prowls, leaps, tumbles all the while speaking with machine-gun velocity volumes about the gamut of personal and Palestinian angst.

As Heather Lawrence interprets Wanda, she provides equal passion and strength to her personification of Israel, sufficient to make the conflict between her and Brutus not only believable but inevitable and irresolvable. Ms. Lawrence conveys a complete range of emotion and physicality that precludes any stereotyping of herself as a female. Her Wanda is powerful, coy, sexy, violent, brave, vulnerable and supremely intelligent, and she is a joy to watch and listen to.

Frank, whom we all know from current events, is given an almost endearing quality by Kurt Brighton. While inadvertently providing the humor that recognition of the send-up of the Leader of the Free World, he also makes Frank chillingly realistic by turning a mirror onto ourselves and making us question our country’s role in the larger world. Frank wants to be a hero, but he is providing the very stuff of death to anyone with the price. He disdains Brutus’s violence and inaction as he simultaneously covets Brutus’s family’s [olive] oil. He must

also acknowledge his attraction to Wanda's allure and their loving past relationship. Brighton manages the teeter-totter with exquisite timing, seeming self-deprecation and great wit.

In his Bas Bleu debut, Duane Sawyer, no stranger to other local stages, give us a Watson, alias Tony Blair, to fall in love with. We witness Watson's struggles with his former glory and his current second-rate power status, longing for the former while being forced to deal with the latter. He knows that he is somehow responsible for Brutus's and Wanda's problems, but he is powerless to alter anything, and so he must support Frank's efforts. Sawyer is charming and lovable as Watson, and he makes us wish that somehow he could wrest his strength back and take over and solve the world's problems.

Director, Sandi King, has taken up the challenge of this complex play and made it accessible and entertaining, despite Shanley's rather obtuse first act. She has marshaled her troops, cast and crew, into a beautifully functioning whole.

Eric Corneliuson designed the effective set, was master carpenter and fight choreographer. Bryan Morton designed the lighting, and Mr. Livaditis doubled as scenic artist. Hannah Brooks, assistant director, also stage managed and ran the light board. Amy Hochevar operated the sound designed by Don Kraus. Liz Droge designed the costumes, and Karen and John Nystrom provided props. The work of the production crew is only brilliant.

If there is a villain to be named in the proceedings, the title must fall to the playwright. Realizing full well that to criticize a Pulitzer Prize winner is to demonstrate frightening "chutzpah," I must point out that "Dirty Story," was written a year prior to the big-winner, "Doubt," and therefore is fair game. While a patient audience will ultimately understand the plot and its twists, perhaps a re-ordering of the play's events would iron out the mental wrinkles and provide a smoother path to appreciation of the metaphor Shanley uses. While we marvel at the language of Act I, we shunt aside some interruptive questions about Brutus's and Wanda's meeting. Who are they? Why are they meeting? How did they come together? Who is the nearly silent third person on the stage, Lawrence, and what purpose does he serve?

Of course, it all becomes crystal clear in Act II. However, with just a little apprehension, I must wonder if the use of a flashback and better early exposition would create a more linear and more easily grasped story, as Shanley so brilliantly demonstrated in "Doubt."

"Dirty Story," is an important play for our time. Regardless of one's stance on either domestic or foreign policy, this play presents almost limitless permutation of fact and opinion, thereby opening our minds enough to let the light of justice in.