

## Theater review: Dirty Story

# Down and Dirty

Bas Bleu's newest show is right—  
and also tragically, tragically wrong

By Andra Coberly

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No stranger to controversy, Bas Bleu tackles the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through the allegorical Dirty Story debuting Jan. 26.

*"It's never the case that a work of art is directly responsible for changing the world. ... People make the world, (and) art is one of the many ways we do that."*—Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* playwright, to *The New York Times*.

"Can someone pick up the ball-gag and wash it off? I'd really like to practice with it in my mouth."

Heather Lawrence would have gotten the little red object from the floor herself had she not been tied up, bound to a large wooden ladder with thick black rope. Director Sandi Klug asks a young stagehand to get the ball and rinse it. She had to make a special trip to The Book Ranch to purchase the item, a toy used in S&M foreplay. It was the 62-year-old grandmother's first time in an adult toy store.

In the intense rehearsal phase of pre-production, the cast is working particularly hard on the staging and pacing of this scene, a pivotal moment in John Patrick Shanley's political comedy-drama *Dirty Story*.

But that darned ball-gag just isn't working right.

In the middle of the hauntingly powerful scene—right after Lawrence is tied up and right before the nipple clips come out—the ball-gag falls from Lawrence's mouth. It bounces once or twice and rolls down the stage—more reminiscent of a child's toy than an object used for dirty, deviant things.

Everyone laughs.

It's Jan. 11, just 16 days before opening night. Sixteen days to finish memorizing lines and get costumes picked, lighting staged, accents perfect.

Sixteen days to make sure the ball-gag doesn't roll down the stage in the middle of actor Sotirios Livaditis' monologue.

On Jan. 26, Bas Bleu Theatre Company will open *Dirty Story*, Shanley's allegorical ode to love and war that blends the definitions of interpersonal conflict and international conflict. It's *War of the Roses*—with oil, guns, tanks and nipple clips.

As the writer of *Moonstruck* and *Italian American Reconciliation*, Shanley is known for his sharp, witty and feuding couples. But *Dirty Story*'s Wanda (Lawrence) and Brutus (Livaditis) are not your average pair of quarreling lovers. They are nations embroiled in a vicious, disgusting war.

Halfway through the play, a spat over rights to Brutus' apartment becomes a blatant metaphor for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Frank (FC Weekly writer Kurt Brighton), a gun-totting, cigarette-peddling American who talks like Dubya and swaggers like a post-modern cowboy, and Watson (Duane Sawyer), Frank's British indentured side-kick, round out Shanley's geopolitical metaphor.

No, ball-gags and nipple clips are not the only things that make Bas Bleu's newest show unquestionably controversial. The theater company is taking on the ceaselessly heated conflict in the Middle East—a back and forth that is so critical that even the opinions held by those a half a world away are stubbornly zealous.

And Klug expects reactions from those who see the show.

"We have not done our jobs if people do not walk out each weekend," Klug says.

*Dirty Story* is certainly not the first time the company will invade its audience's comfort zones. Ranking enlightenment next to entertainment, Bas Bleu is recognized for its "bold and adventurous works that both entertain and inform," according to its Web site. Just take last year's productions: Bertolt Brecht's anti-war diatribe *Mother Courage and her Children* and *The Swain*—complete with a fully nude man pretending to be a bird named Bill.

Theirs is a strong and passionate commitment to the production of didactic theater that pushes audiences often into uncomfortable worlds. And *Dirty Story* is no exception.

"I would like the audience to question their basic beliefs," Klug says. "The most powerful message is at the end, when they talk about playing with other people's lives and money. This is not something on the other side of the planet that doesn't affect us."

The play has already challenged the beliefs of the cast and crew. Both the actors, crew and Klug say that their thoughts on the conflict have "gone all over the place" since first reading the script. During the beginning of rehearsals, Klug and the cast—as well as former Beirut hostage Tom Sutherland acting as a facilitator to the conversation—had a rousing discussion about the issue. By the end of the talk, there was yelling and passionate debate.

"I couldn't believe it," she says. "It was really heated."

But by the next rehearsal, Klug says, the argument was over. As they say, the show must go on.

"We got it out in the open, we talked about it," she says. "We had to get past that. Often you can become so focused on the message that you forget the characters. We had to put (the politics) in the back of our minds and look at these characters."

While Lawrence's Wanda, an idealistic aspiring writer, may represent Israel, and Livaditis' Brutus, a has-been author who likes "to poke open assumptions and let the stink out," is Palestine, the real challenge for Klug and the actors became to make them human.

In the first half of *Dirty Story*, the audience successfully comes to know these characters as people—a bit creepy but people nonetheless. In a psychopathic game of cat and mouse, Lawrence and Livaditis have a heated chemistry that is enthralling and, well, dirty.

When the tension in their relationship escalates, Wanda, no longer bound and not silenced by the small ball, then tells Brutus to “call me Israel.” Through violence and hatred, Brutus becomes despondent and suicidal, Wanda’s femininity is gone.

That’s when the story gets real.

“Everyone of the characters and the countries they are representing is right at some point in the play,” Klug says. “And they are also tragically, tragically wrong.”

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## **Dirty Story**

Bas Bleu Theater, 401 Pine St., 498-8949.

Opens on Saturday, Jan. 27 with reception.

Thursday, Jan. 25, March 1 and 8; Friday-Saturday, through March 10; and Sunday, Feb. 4-March 4.