

The Gazette

Does Suicide have to be the main theme on stages this season?

Bleaker than this you cannot find: Rape, mutilation and cannibalism decked the stages this Easter

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What do Hungarians and Quebecers have in common? An uncommonly high suicide rate.

This I learned from Hungarian playwright Peter Kárpáti when I spoke to him, via a translator, after a performance of his *Toutefemme*, based on the medieval morality play, *Everyman*, at Espace Go.

In eastern Europe, only Russia has a higher rate, he added.

In fact, Quebec's suicide rate is high only in comparison to the rest of Canada. We're not in the eastern European league, at all. Their percentages more than double ours.

But during Easter week, as I attended one suicide-themed play after another, I began to wonder why.

Did it have something to do with the mental states of theatre artists? Or late-winter programming habits? The last play I attended that week was *'night Mother*, a two-hander about an epileptic woman (Alexandra Valassis) who is about to commit suicide, and her mother (Sandy Ferguson), who tries to talk her out of it. There's a poignant moment when the daughter argues that Jesus Christ himself was suicidal.

So does Easter serve as a timing incentive for these plays? There certainly was something Lenten about them.

The first suicide play I attended, *Le Fou de Dieu*, by Stéphane Brulotte, opened a couple of weeks before Ash Wednesday.

In it, a young Olympic-level athlete (Benoît McGinnis), obsessed with St. Francis of Assisi and racked with guilt over the death of his mother, threatens to jump off a roof. In an interview with a local paper, the theatre company's artistic director Dominic Champagne insisted that the play wasn't a "downer" - that it was full of light.

Infinithatre director Guy Sprung insisted the same thing when talking about *Zarathustra Said Some Things, No?* True, the story hinged on a suicide pact between two lovers holed up in a flat in Paris, but it was "life-affirming" he insisted. What did I want, fluffy musicals?, he asked.

Occasionally, yes. Or a light-hearted comedy. A city as large as Montreal, with a bustling, burgeoning artistic scene, should be able to offer a wide variety of theatrical fare, no? Why are

Montrealers being offered such an overdose on self-destructive angst? During the worst winter we've had in years? I want to know.

At least, *Relative Good*, inspired by the true story of Maher Arar, now playing at Centaur Theatre, deals only with unjust incarceration and torture in Syria. The victim does survive.

When Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, now playing at Usine C, in French, opened in London in 1995, causing a firestorm of controversy, theatregoers had the option of attending any number of farces, satires, musicals or dramatic works of varying hues, later in the week, for balance.

After seeing *Blasté* (on Good Friday, the only night I could get a ticket to this sold-out show), I needed balance.

Attempted suicide (by pistol) is but one "downer" moment in a play that illustrates the madness of war through scenes of rape, mutilation and cannibalism. Bleaker than this is hard to find. The playwright herself committed suicide before she hit 30.

But the play itself hasn't caused a ripple in Montreal, only its poster. Officials at the Société de transport de Montréal decided not to allow the *Blasté* poster, which features Dupuis in bloody, tattered clothing, to appear in métro stations, lest it upset the customers, especially the "fragile" ones.

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against tragedy as a theatrical form. In fact, when done well (which is seldom), I would choose it over comedy. I do see the psychological value in catharsis as well as in laughter. And the field of musical therapy interests me, too.

In a secular age, the soul needs art more than ever.

Toutefemme, translated into French by Paul Lefebvre, offers a fragmented, tragi-comic blend, a style that connects intimately with the essence of modern urban life. *Kárpáti* has turned *Everyman* into an over-worked, single-mother *Everywoman* (Annick Bergeron). Faced with a cancer diagnosis, she enters into a nightmarish frenzy of mundane activities and ends up wrestling with *Death* (Jean Maheux) on the subway platform that forms the basis of the decor.

After *Toutefemme*, I took the métro home, only to hear that all-too-familiar announcement over the P.A. system. There had been an "incident." The green line would be shut down for another 15 minutes. Pure coincidence, I'm sure, but it was chilling. Later, I checked with the STM and was told there had indeed been an incident requiring an ambulance that night, although it may not have been a "jumper." (Apparently, only about one-third of the people who attempt suicide by métro train achieve their goal.) Still, I kept my Saturday night appointment to see *'night Mother*, presented by a newborn theatre company called *Altera Vitae* (in Latin, hope of another life), headed by the feisty Carolyn-Fe Trinidad. The quality of the writing in this Pulitzer-winning play is such that it delivers catharsis even in a shoestring, quasi-professional production. Valassis is deeply convincing as the over-organized daughter, while Ferguson doesn't have quite as strong a grasp on the mother role.

After the play, each night, they come forward to speak to the audience about FSOS (Family Survivors of Suicide), a self-help group that offers support to those who have lost loved ones to suicide. A portion of the proceeds from the production goes to FSOS.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all the big-budget theatre companies presenting suicide plays did the same thing? Just a thought.

Toutefemme, by Peter Kárpáti, continues at Espace Go, 4890 St. Laurent Blvd. until April 12. Call 514-845-4890 or visit www.espacego.com. 'Night Mother, by Marsha Norman, continues at Mainline Theatre, 3997 St. Laurent Blvd., through tomorrow at 8 p.m. Matinées today and tomorrow. Call 514-823-8823 or visit www.alteravita.com.

Zarathustra Said Some Things, No?, by Trevor Ferguson, continues at Théâtre La Chapelle, 3700 St. Dominique St., until tomorrow. Call (514) 843-7738. Blasté, by Sarah Kane, at Usine C, 1345 Lalonde Ave., until April 5. Call 514-521-4493 or 514-790-1245.

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