

Steadstyle Chicago

May 2010 Theatre Review by Alan Bresloff

Baal



Tuta Theatre Chicago is one of our more intellectual troupes, taking on some great theatrical challenges: Shakespeare, Chekhov, Beckett and Brecht, who I suppose is one of their favorites. On the heels of their latest, well received "The Wedding," loosely based on Brecht's "A Respectable Wedding," Tuta is now taking on "Baal", the first play ever written by Bertolt Brecht and as it turns out his last. Since the subject matter of the story, the God known as Baal was supposedly the God of Storm and fertility as his politics changed, he found ways of using his scripts and productions to get his point to the theater audiences of his time. Thus, the play was written several times, but the newer versions did not make the impression that he had hoped it would. Each version had its own political agenda, of its era and perhaps this version does as well. You decide what's right, you decide what's good! That is one of the beauties of live theater. We all get to interpret what we see as we see it.

"Baal" is often looked at as a rock star, a man who fights the system, perhaps a "Jesus Christ Superstar" character. Baal is a drunk on both the liquid forms and the female forms. Is he a God or a devil? Each viewer, depending on their own personality may see it just a bit differently. The story was written with music of which Brecht wrote the lyrics. In this version translated by Peter Tegel, Josh Schmidt has taken the text and composed music that is inspiring, hymnal and very passionate. Director Zeljko Djukie has put together a very talented cast with some solid musical background to make this epic tale come to life.

Ian Westerfer takes on the role of Baal with enough ego to make you either love him or hate him. His friend who he calls brother Ekart is deftly handled by Peter Oyloe, who is always impressive with his character development. They are all honest looks at real people. He also plays a mean guitar as does Westerfer, who also handles the Bass. Ben Harris is the other musician in this two hour tale with no intermission. In fact, the entire production doesn't even begin in the theater at The Chopin Studio on Division. It begins in the lobby. As we waited to be told the doors are open, Harris began to play the piano and several of the actors came into the lobby making us feel we were the interlopers at some sort of a party. As we looked on, we met Baal and saw some of his antics and then proceeded into the stage area and took our seats, as did the actors.

As we watched the love stories and sexual scenes unveil, the actors were in seats just in front of us. This is another one of the intimate venues in town, where you feel that the actors are speaking directly to you and when one smiles your way, you might think they are smiling at you. The stories move at a quick clip and I will tell you that it is important to keep your focus. The stories intertwine and some of the ensemble (the name for those actors who have smaller roles, but are of great importance) play dual and triple roles. So you need to know who is who, who is doing who and why Baal is so into himself.

Brandon Wardell's set is simple but very workable and the lighting by Keith Parham sets the moods to perfection. The costumes by Natasha Vuchurovich and the props by Joel Lambie are the icing on the cake as is the sound design with one exception. The rain, although very realistic, in fact perhaps too realistic, needs to be toned down just a bit. Try to imagine a two hour period of sitting, knowing that there is no bathroom time and 20 minutes of hearing water running. A lot of audience members were sitting cross-legged near the end. While it is great and adds to the mood, perhaps just a little less in quantity or volume would make it easier to concentrate on the wonderful talent that has been assembled on the Tuta stage.

Dana Black, Ted Evans, Lindsey Gavel, Steve Hadnagy, Stacie Beth Green, Rachel Rizzuto, Jacqueline Stone and Dana Wall are all fine actors with some nice voices in handling the music as well. In order to truly tell a story that can be interpreted in many different ways, the director and his actors must understand just what the playwright was suggesting. If they do, the story unfolds with ease. If not, there will be lots of confusion on the part of those audience members. This production tells the story perfectly and if one thinks about it, there are some parallels with our times as far as the economy, the arts and relationships.

Does Baal stick to his own beliefs? Does he sell out? These are some of the answers that you will get to find out by getting to the Chopin Theatre located at 1543 West Division at Ashland and Milwaukee Avenues through June 20, 2010. Performances are Thursday-Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$25 (general admission) and students and seniors only \$18.00. To order tickets call 847-217-0691 or visit www.tutato.com. There is street parking, some metered, some not in the area and CTA can get you within feet of the door via blue line and bus service.

About Alan Bresloff

Alan Bresloff, once an actor himself, has been covering the Chicago Theater Scene since 1993, first as the Theater and Arts critic for LaRaza newspaper, then with Salsachicago.com and then onto Extra Newspaper and The Epoch Times. He also writes for ElImparcial and TeleGuia. His reviews can also be seen on www.theatreinchicago.com. Alan does not call himself a "critic" but a "reviewer" as he tries to educate the reader about theater itself, what is a good value, what to look for in a play or musical and more.

"Exposure to theater is a very important part of a young person's life" he says. "Learning about the arts and culture is in fact learning about life" and he tries to explain more in his reviews than just if it is good or bad. Even some of the poor productions have some value, he often says and he would love your feedback on shows that you have seen. You can write him here or at albresloff@sbcglobal.net.

