

Theater

Stage Review: 'The Grey Zone' is a powerful and horrifying Holocaust drama

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Mark Tierno, left, Gregory Johnstone, Patrick Jordan and Randy Kovitz play Auschwitz inmates in barebones productions' "The Grey Zone."

By Christopher Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Holocaust plays are many and varied. But Tim Blake Nelson's "The Grey Zone," now at barebones productions, goes directly to the horrifying heart of the matter, taking us right into the belly of the beast -- Auschwitz itself.

In this murky zone, the victims are grey and the air filters down a fine grey ash of death on all beneath. But grey goes beyond visual. The play also suggests that, in this pit of hell, even ethics and morality are grey zones of inevitable confusion and compromise.

We don't think that to start. We don't even know what to think, because Nelson's admirable dramaturgy thrusts us directly into the ongoing action with no pause for exposition. Immediately we meet inmates Rosenthal, Schlermer, Abramowicz and Hoffman, Hungarian Jews whom the Nazis treat relatively well because they do the unimaginable work of the crematoria, ushering in new victims and then cleaning out the bodies.

'The Grey Zone'

■ **Where:** barebones productions at Cultural District Center, 121 Seventh Street, Downtown.

■ **When:** Through Nov. 19; Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun. 7 p.m.

■ **Tickets:** \$10-\$15 (reservations)

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Awful as that is, another Hungarian inmate, Dr. Nyiszli, is treated even better, because he does autopsies on the bodies of children subjected to the fiendish "experiments" presided over by the notorious Dr. Mengele.

recommended); 412-363-5847.

The play's speed and slim exposition are not just gimmicks, they're keys to the story. The inmate crews know that, no matter how useful their experience and expertise has made them to the Nazis, they, too, will soon be sent to the ovens and new crews recruited -- and as Jonathan Swift memorably wrote in a 1739 attack on man's inhumanity to man, "butchers we may be assured will not be wanting."

In such a place, the morality of survival would puzzle Socrates, let alone these frantic men. It's late in 1944 and the eastern front is drawing closer, but there's no way the Nazis will leave them to be saved. They have little time left, and they have decided to fight back -- as the play starts, they are well along in their plans.

But there are jealousies between different barracks and ethnicities, exacerbated by different languages and the fragility of life. And should they hope to escape or concentrate on blowing up the ovens?

We piece this situation together gradually. And then they find a young girl who miraculously survived the gas. She is their entire situation in a microcosm -- what to do? Dr. Nyiszli has his own moral agonies. How can he do what he does? Why? Is survival worth it?

There are lots of possible answers for us observers to contemplate, but these men have to make cataclysmic decisions on the dead run, with death all around.

Under Jason Nodler's direction, the setting helps us feel their confinement and despair. Above Seventh Street, within a huge, empty room stripped to its brick walls and high wooden beams, the acting area is a tight, curtained rectangle, including a stairwell and a freight elevator that sure looks like it descends to a slaughterhouse below.

Each scene starts in the dark (as are we all), and Scott Nelson's sensitive lighting sometimes uses just one instrument or even one match. Some scenes are just an expressive tableau; others pulse with urgency. Act 1 is the quickest 40 minutes you've spent in the theater, and Act 2 is quicker still.

Director Nodler and artistic director Patrick Jordan have enlisted a capable cast, all of whom sacrificed their hair and maybe some recent meals for a haggard look, to which Angela Vesco's baggy costumes contribute.

Bingo O'Malley (who even shaved his beard) is perfectly cast as the tormented doctor; by simplifying and reining in his anguish, he makes it even more powerful. As the other inmates, Jordan, Randy Kovitz and Gregory Johnstone play variations on the same desperation and bewildered morality, and Mark Tierno is plaintive as the subservient Hoffman, who has his dreams, too.

Mark Staley is firm as the inevitable Nazi whose own moral shortcuts show the greyness of all judgment. Playing the girl is Chelsea Mervis, who seems to have the Pittsburgh franchise for young women in grim situations, witness "One Flea Spare," "The Crucible" and "Pillowman" all in the past year. She is a haunting presence in that dark place.

The play is as powerful as such a story demands, tautly directed and with no-frills acting of conviction. It's not for the weak of heart.

Don't expect any answers. The enormity of the Holocaust is hard to comprehend, especially at the epicenter of evil. That this play is based on the account of the real Dr. Nyiszli, who survived, is even more incomprehensible. But as the number of Holocaust plays suggests (a new one by Amy Hartman premieres this weekend), facing up to the darkness of human possibility is a debt we owe to history.

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