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REVIEWS



Maritxell Carrero as Tomasina, Diana Elizabeth as Jordan (Ma Joad) and the ensemble in *Swarm Cell*, written by Gabriel Rivas Gomez, directed by Robert Castro (Photo by Marjorie LeWit)



Swarm Cell

Reviewed by Paul Birchall

Greenway Court Theatre

Through February 28

Playwright Gabriel Rivas Gomez's eccentric, uneven drama is loosely based on themes from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Filtered through a prism of modern corporate capitalism, it's a tale of American kindness — or more accurately, about the lack of it as far as poor immigrants and our underclass are concerned.

America, the play tells us, loves its winners, and those who are struggling — well, they really *must* learn to shift for themselves. Oh, and if it's possible to make a buck off of them, so much the better!

Tomasina (Maritxell Carrero) is a young, pregnant immigrant from Nicaragua starving on the cruel streets of some American city. After meeting up with a homeless deaf girl, K.C. (Raquel McPeek), who feeds her a handful of invisible food (I'm not sure how it works, but they eat an invisible piece of chicken together), they wind up in a sort of warehouse where they pack boxes for an Amazon or

Walmart-like super conglomerate. While they slave, a vile female supervisor (Caro Zeller) storms in to yell at them every so often, and orders them to work harder. Tomasina and K.C. are miserable, and so are the rest of the warehouse workers who are all trapped in a cycle of indentured servitude: They get their food at the company store, which hooks them with so much credit that they can't ever pay it off except by packing boxes until they die.

It's true that the work is staged with a commendable amount of anger towards those who exploit and a nicely evoked sense of sympathy for those who are oppressed. But Gomez's narrative is otherwise choppy and confusing, with incidents that draw awkward parallels with the original Steinbeck novel. Even with the richest stew of outrage possible, this isn't the 1930s Dust Bowl, and Amazon.com isn't the migrant fields. Yes, we live in a world where greedy tycoons own almost all the wealth and the rest of us claw and scabble about for the crumbs, but this point is made in a such a shrill and non-credible manner that it undercuts the play's central themes.

While art should challenge and make you think, there's also a type of art that strives for a reaction merely by befuddling the audience. It seems like this is what we have here. Director Robert Castro's muddled staging is top heavy with symbolic gestures and metaphorical posturing that fail to accomplish any emotionally evocative purpose. The entire company - from the playwright to the director to the cast - might have some idea of what they're doing, but viewers, seeing the show only once, are left out in the cold.

Worse, after the amplified whispers, eerie bells, and sounds of people moaning (sound design by John Zalewski), you're left gnashing your teeth at Victoria Petrovich's drab (perhaps intentionally) minimalist set and Jose Lopez's entirely fluorescent lighting (If I wanted to dry my eyes out staring at florescent lights all night, I would just stay at my work cubicle).

Performances are heartfelt and nicely affecting, but the lack of professional polish sometimes shows through, giving the work a roughness that, admittedly, isn't always a negative. What clearly is a problem are the theater's echo-like acoustics, which sometimes make it tough to make out the dialogue, particularly when many lines appear to be non-sequiturs or nonsensical.

Carrero is appropriately angry as the pregnant, homeless immigrant, while Zeller has some nice moments as the mean supervisor, resigned to her fate, and Jordan is appealing as the motherly Ma Joad. But the play itself is mainly a choppy, incoherent and unpleasant mess.

Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax, Los Angeles; Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun. 7 p.m.; through February 28. boxoffice@greenwayarts.org or 323-655-7679. Running time: 100 minutes with no intermission



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