

Review 'Swarm Cell' at Greenway Court is a cryptic take on 'Grapes of Wrath'



Maritxell Carrero, center, Diana Elizabeth Jordan, right, and the ensemble of "Swarm Cell" at Greenway Court Theatre. (Marjorie LeWit)

By **David C. Nichols**

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Although “The Grapes of Wrath” has seen many adaptations, few have received a treatment quite like “Swarm Cell” at Greenway Court Theatre.

This sincerely intended, valiantly performed, still-gelling deconstruction applies a decidedly postmodern, proto-feminist spin to John Steinbeck’s classic Dust Bowl saga.

Written by Gabriel Rivas Gomez, with contributions from students at Fairfax High School, the work’s title alludes to a beehive -- one of the principal motifs of designer John Zalewski’s sound plot.

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Set at once in the not-too-distant future and “Right here. Right now,” (per the program), “Swarm Cell”

takes an oblique, hyper-theatrical approach to themes from the novel.

Using the tyranny of a legally dubious workplace as narrative spur, the proceedings are visually utilitarian and kinetically specific, from a near-Orwellian opening with the cast assembled around Victoria Petrovich's spare setting.

A sole figure stands facing upstage: pregnant, undocumented Tomasina (Maritxell Carrero), the Tom Joad figure. Crossing her path is K.C. (Raquel McPeck), a deaf stand-in for Steinbeck's preacher man Casey.

Under Robert Castro's diligent direction, their dual advent at a questionable warehouse overseen by stringent Cadabra (Caro Zeller) pulls commitment from the cast. It includes Diana Elizabeth Jordan's soulful Ma Joad counterpart, Bianca LeMaire's astute voice of rebellion and the tag-team of Tania Camargo, Cheryl Ann Gottselig and Sheresade Poblet.

It unfolds with disciplined spatial placement, less-is-more ingenuity and flashes of dramatic poetry, aided by Jose Lopez's stark lighting design.

However, while "Swarm Cell" is admirable in its diversity and cultural overview, it also is stylized to the extreme, the ritual tactics not always dovetailing with even abstract storytelling. The text, which includes passages of untranslated Spanish and American Sign Language, too often forfeits accessibility for symbology, with results that are sometimes riveting, other times downright perplexing.

Aesthetically cohesive yet textually inchoate, "Swarm Cell" ultimately suggests the product of a university theater program, which, along with the festival circuit, is perhaps its ideal future destination.

"Swarm Cell," Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays. Ends Feb. 28. \$20-\$30. (323) 655-7679 or greenwaycourtheatre.org. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

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