

Interview with Caitriona McLaughlin, director of the SummerScape 2010 production of Ödön von Horváth's *Judgment Day*



Bard SummerScape 2010 presents Judgment Day, in Theater Two at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, July 14–25.

Caitriona McLaughlin is an Irish theater director currently based in London, where she has directed such plays as *The Shadowbox*, at the Southwark Playhouse, and *Roman Nights*, *Pete n' Me*, and *Modern Man* at the New End Theatre. Most recently she directed a site-specific production of *The Recruiting Officer* for the Farquhar Blue Eagle Theatre Festival, in Northern Ireland. She has also directed plays in Germany, the Czech Republic, and South Africa. Last week she took a few minutes off from *Judgment Day* rehearsals to answer a few questions.

Q. Without giving away too much, what can you tell prospective viewers about the set of Judgment Day that is currently under construction in the Fisher Center's black-box Theater Two?

Our design team has developed a design concept that totally alters Theater Two's black-box layout. Our starting point for the design was the title of the play itself. I'm fascinated by the concept of a day of reckoning before God. It's captivating to think that a lifetime could end with a final judgment as to whether you are good or bad, right or wrong, saved or condemned. We looked at some places where judgments are made, and thought about

where the audience might fit into those environments. We decided we'd like the audience to look down on the world of the play, so you almost have the feeling of sitting in the judge's chair.

We also thought about small-town Germany in the 1930s, and about how restrictive villages can feel—like you're caught in a place where life is passing you by. We looked at how unsettling and disorientating it must have been to live in Germany at that time, in a world that was constantly changing, and full of fear and uncertainty. We've tried to put some of that movement into our set. You'll have to judge for yourself whether we've succeeded!

Q. If Ödön von Horváth were able to attend today's rehearsal of Judgment Day, what question would you ask him?

I would ask him which characters believe in God and which don't. I'd also ask him which character he considers the most moral. And out of personal interest I'd ask him, "Was it worth it?" It is generally accepted that Horváth did not support the Nazi regime—for example, he married a Jewish opera singer to provide her with a passport. And yet, unlike many of his peers, he chose to return to Germany and join the Nazis' writers union. He earned his living by working for film studios in Berlin and Vienna. He used a pseudonym when he was doing this work; clearly, he was uncomfortable about it. His choice to stay and write about the Nazis from within must have been a difficult one. I think this play talks a lot about the guilt he felt. One could argue that his success as a writer—indeed, his legacy—is partially a result of his insider perspective on life under the Nazi regime. Yet he must have borne witness to the most horrible atrocities and the worst kinds of human behavior. There's no doubt that he produced great art and provocative theater. But I do wonder whether it was worth it.

Q. You're known for your interest in new plays. What attracted you to Judgment Day, which was written in the late 1930s?

The great thing about new plays is the element of surprise—finding a new voice, or an original perspective on an old theme. And being the first director to set the frame of reference for a play is always thrilling. However, there are also great plays and playwrights who write with such deep understanding of the human condition that they can be mined endlessly. Horváth is that kind of writer: an utterly individual voice with enormous depth and scope.

What attracted me was the moral component of the subject matter—the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany. I was brought up Catholic, in Ireland, and I've always been affected by the idea that we should be judged on what we *don't* do as opposed to what we do. I've never forgotten a nun at school quoting Matthew: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." What could be a better metaphor for the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany?

Q. This is a chilling play about some of the darkest of human characteristics: suspicion, deceit, malice. When you're rehearsing a work like this—reading and hearing it dozens of times—how do you avoid taking on a gloomy view of the world yourself?

When I first started directing, I was commissioned by the Red Cross to create a piece of work based on breaches of humanitarian law. The actors were from youth theater groups in Derry and Donegal; they were close in age to the actual young people these things happened to. We were invited to a conference where we presented two extracts from the piece. One dealt with a gang rape, and the other with child soldiers. Because of the subject matter, most of what actually happened was left to the audience's imagination. Yet there was almost a riot. People in the audience were furious! Partly because of the subject matter, but mainly because teenagers were "being put through having to act these horrific incidents." I've never seen a reaction like it. Then one of the actors, a 14-year-old girl named Charlene, stepped forward and said, "But we're only pretending, and it wasn't even good this time! We were much better the last time we did it. Anyway, these things really happened, and we all need to know about what's going in other parts of the world. It happens here too. We just pretend it doesn't. Nobody talks about it."

Whenever I direct a play like this I think about that incident. If I notice that the dark subject matter is starting to get to me, I try to adopt Charlene's perspective. Sometimes it is very important to look at who and what we are, individually, as a society and as a global citizen. Theater is the ideal medium to do that. You cannot switch it off or leave the room. Of course the research aspect can be difficult; it's painful to learn what people are capable of.