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MSU production raises questions, offers few answers

BY PAUL WOZNIAK (HTTP://LANSINGCITYPULSE.COM/BY-AUTHOR-125-1.HTML)

Why are people so mean to each other? That's the basic question behind Simon Stephens' "Punk Rock," a play about seven anxious teenagers in a high pressure British grammar school. Review Stephens' provocative script never answers this question, but Michigan State University Department of Theatre's adrenaline-fueled production makes sure the question will linger with audiences long after the show closes.

Just to clarify, "Punk Rock" is not about the music genre or musicians — although a live rock band, Daisy and the Murder F*ckers, provides the soundtrack from behind a scrim wall — but the show does feature graphic language and violence.

Set in contemporary England, "Punk Rock" is simultaneously hyper-realistic and a dark, dystopian spoof on pop culture. The primary cast — Emma Callis, Trevor Earley, Janette Angelini, Teriah Fleming, Lukas Jacob, Evan Houdek, and Grant Cleaveland — plays characters that start off as high school archetypes, à la "The Breakfast Club." But those archetypes quickly devolve into darker, more unsettlingly complex people, turning from John Hughes snark into "Lord of the Flies"-type terror.

Callis plays the alt-goth new girl who handles stress by burning marks into her skin. She keeps nice guy William (Earley) at arm's length. Jacob plays alpha dog Bennett, a tall, cocky bully who slings non-stop insults at nearly everyone. His favorite targets include nice girl Tanya (Fleming) and tightly wound nerd Chadwick (Cleaveland). Bennett is usually flanked by girlfriend Cissy (Angelini) and pal Nicholas (Houdek).

The play is less a contiguous story than a series of dramatic interactions, revealing friendships and hidden love triangles. As the tension ramps up, everyone seems like either a ticking time-bomb or the spark that could set one off. Just when you begin to empathize with one character, they turn into a monster by the next scene.

Director Rob Roznowski keeps the hour and 45 minute show moving at a breakneck pace, with characters spitting out their dialogue in impressive English accents. The pacing and strong performances allow the audience to get sucked into a posh, prep-school drama that quickly turns bleak and uncompromising.

Peter Verhaeghe's set design turns the Studio 60 black box space into a wall hugging thrust stage. The audience practically sits in a beautifully destroyed library vandalized by graffiti

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stage. The audience practically ate and breathing destroyed notes, ruminated by grime and time. Lee Jones' chic costumes clothe the actors with prep school appropriate monogrammed ties and sport coats.

The show ends with the inexplicable shooting deaths of three of the students. Despite the anti-climactic and unnecessary epilogue that tries to rule out some possibilities, there are no easy answers. It's easy to "Americanize" the aftermath, with discussions about mental health and gun control, but the fact that it's not set in the U.S. forces audiences to ask broader questions about the characters and their motivations. Maybe it's a commentary on pervasive objectification and dehumanization, male insecurity or fear of feminism.

Arguably the most satisfying aspect of this production is how complete it feels. There is no unpolished acting or fumbled technical cues to distract from the content. It's not an easy play to digest, but its eerie relevance make it essential viewing.

"Punk Rock"

MSU Department of Theatre

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 5-Thursday, Oct. 6; 8:00 p.m. Friday, Oct. 7-Saturday, Oct. 8; 2:00 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 9

\$15/\$10 students

Studio 60 Theatre 542 Auditorium Road, East Lansing

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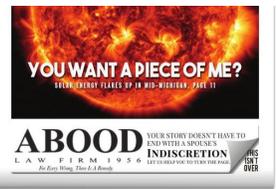
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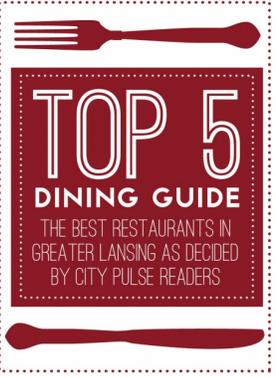
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