

An eerie trip inside a killer's mind

THEATRE REVIEW

STAY

Written by David Demchuk
Directed by Anne Driscoll
Starring Mark Harapiak
and Caroline Gillis
Rating: ★★

RAY CONLOGUE
The Globe and Mail, Toronto

David Demchuk has been on the fringes of the Toronto theatre scene for many years, honing a series of plays about extreme sexual violence. *Stay* is an attempt to imagine the inside of a child-killing psychopath's mind, and it is as eerie and disquieting an experience as you might expect.

Joey, as he appears in a brightly lit cage that suddenly appears out of the darkness of the stage, has been sentenced to death — the play takes place before the abolition of capital punishment in Canada — and is looking forward to it. It is very hard, he informs us in quiet and measured tones, to be the "special grown-up friend" of a series of small children. He seems to have a special ability to coax out their deepest fear and confusion about life, that confusing kaleidoscope they have not yet deciphered. He resolves their fears by killing them.

His annoyingly persistent lawyer has succeeded in gaining a stay of execution (one of the meanings of the play's title), and a promise of possible release. The next scene is a monologue by Joey's boyhood friend Roberta — a "normal" woman. Joey, released from jail, has visited her in the middle of the night, first cutting off her power and telephone. Her accounting of her fear is palpable and hair-raising — Demchuk is nothing if not a master of bowel-loosening terror — but Joey wishes her no harm. She strongly hints that they have sex, and he then asks her to end the "pain" in his head by killing him.

A final scene, a flashback, returns us to the jail just before his release, where he explains why he proposes to visit Roberta in this dire fashion. It appears she has been complicit in an earlier murder, of an adult, and he has reason to believe she will oblige him by ending his life.

The play suggests a shadow world on the edge of human experience that is inhabited not only by people like Joey, who perform great evil but maintain a peculiar innocence through having no control of their actions, and a larger population of those who need and crave the company of people like Joey.

Any number of writers have tried to imagine the minds of those who murder casually and without compunction, almost always portraying them as icy embodiments of evil. Demchuk, instead, suggests that someone like Joey may simply be overwhelmed by a defect in mental wiring over which he has no control. The rest of the time he is tormented to distraction by the knowledge of what he has done.

The writer's real opprobrium is reserved for Roberta, who has had blood on her hands more than once and seems to take some pleasure in it. Is she the true psychopath, or simply a normal person with the courage to push her fantasies to occasional actualization?

Caroline Gillis plays Roberta as a winsome and romantic soul who knows the names of all the constellations, and only gradually reveals to us the "terrible" night when Joey came to visit her. Her final revelation of what she did that night is delivered in a matter-of-fact fashion, and it's safe to say that anybody who thought at first she'd be a great date has had second thoughts by then.

Mark Harapiak's Joey is genial and low-keyed, too monotonously so for my taste; just as I found Gillis too erotically overwrought in her "terror." Director Anne Driscoll hasn't found a way to make the characters come fully to life, even though she has a few arresting *coups de théâtre* (such as the moment when Joey steps through his bars and with animal grace descends a steep rake and leaps down onto the stage).

But the problem may also be in Demchuk's writing. He has been wrestling with these issues for many years, staring at them face-on, but maybe they don't yield to that kind of examination. And the tight focus suggests that perhaps there isn't anything else, that everybody on some level is like these characters.

That strikes me as not right. Chilly killers from Richard III to Hermann Hesse are compelling because they are loose in a world of people who cannot on any level grasp what they are, until it is too late. Yes, anybody can find a shark beautiful; but that is not the same thing as wanting to swim with them.

Until June 6 at *Theatre Passe Muraille*.



Mark Harapiak plays Joey, a child-killing psychopath, and Caroline Gillis plays Roberta, his boyhood friend, in David Demchuk's disquieting play.