

Theater review

Adam Rapp's *Through the Yellow Hour*: Doom and gloom pervades....

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Written and directed by Adam Rapp, Rattlestick Playwright's Theater, New York City

"Don't wait to be anointed. Make work. Make it in your living room. Make it in a garage. Find a gymnasium. Find an empty room somewhere and start making work and don't wait for anyone to come and tell you it's great, just make it for the sake of making it."

This is the advice playwright Adam Rapp offers to up-and-coming playwrights.

The prolific Mr. Rapp has been anointed, it seems, by the Off-Broadway community in recent years, judging by the success of *Red Light Winter* (2005, a Pulitzer Prize nominee), *The Metal Children* (2010) and *The Hallway Trilogy* (2011), among numerous other works.

However determined and praiseworthy the "make it for the sake of making it" mentality may appear to some, it is no guarantee against forced and unfocused results. And that is exactly what Rapp comes up with in his latest piece, *Through the Yellow Hour*, currently at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in New York.

Tight, claustrophobic locations recur in Rapp's writings. And most of his plays to date have been set on Manhattan's Lower East Side. *Through the Yellow Hour* is no exception, although here perhaps the stakes are a little higher. Why? Well, we are asked to believe that an Islamist terrorist group, ridiculously named The Eggheads, have taken over the city.

Ellen (Hani Furstenberg) is hiding out, pining for her husband who vanished two months ago after leaving the apartment to seek food. Her introspection is cut short by the arrival of a catatonic, otherworldly figure whom Rapp has christened Dead Man (Brian Mendes).

After the latter is dealt with in an appropriately

"shocking" manner, Maude (Danielle Slavick), a deranged drug addict shows up, with her daughter, seeking refuge from the terrorists. Ellen is at first suspicious of Maude's presence, but somewhat predictably for storytelling purposes, she allows the guest and her child to settle down in her ruinous abode.

One hopes that some light might shed on things by the arrival of Hakim (Alok Tewaki), a middle-aged Iraqi who enters in military attire. But, no, Hakim appears only to provide gruesome details about the death of Ellen's husband. The scene is both pedestrian and heavy-handed in its dialogue and direction. To give him credit, Tewaki delivers his lines with as much warmth and humanity as he can muster.

Then, in a twist meant to astonish us, Hakim suggests that the terrorists are not Muslims, but mercenaries funded by a few giant corporations. Certain critics and audience members may be impressed by this "objectivity," but, in reality, Rapp irresponsibly avoids taking any position on—or offering any insight into—the circumstances he himself has created.

In an interview, Rapp explained why he chose to write *Through the Yellow Hour*:

"I've been reading a lot about the civil war in Syria, all the sort of strife in Egypt...[these places] where there's so much chaos and uncertainty and I thought, well, what if we put that uncertainty and chaos in a very mysterious and strange way right here in New York City? How would we have to deal with that? How would you survive in a world like that? How would you subsist in a world where men are being castrated? What are the stakes of staying alive? What are the stakes of staying sane? What are the stakes of simply getting through a day?"

The remarks are astonishing and revealing. First, it has apparently escaped Mr. Rapp's attention that conditions of "uncertainty and chaos" exist for wide layers of New York City's population, and the issue of "staying alive" and "simply getting through a day" is not exactly unfamiliar for large numbers there, either.

Nor does it occur to him that wretched and dangerous conditions exist for masses of people in Egypt and Syria in considerable measure because of the intervention of the US and other imperialist powers, not simply in the last few years, but over the course of decades, and even centuries.

Moreover, the US wars of intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia—and ensuing misery—have a great deal to do with the social tensions and contradictions *in America*. In that sense, a playwright in Syria or Iran might have thought to him- or herself a few years ago, "Well, I've been reading about the crazy conditions in New York City. What if we put all that uncertainty and chaos right here in Damascus or Tehran?" Of course, the difference is that the uncertainty and chaos in those cities have now been provided courtesy of the US military and CIA, not the limited imagination of a Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright.

This is not a good play. Rapp has written extensively for film and television, most notably for *The L Word* on Showtime, and this latest effort suggests he has acquired some unfortunate habits. Tepid, naturalistic dialogue pervades the 1 hour and 40 minute work, and much of it, frankly, comes across as laziness.

The playwright bombards us with "in your face" pseudo-realism, devoting much of his attention to the gratuitous. This reviewer isn't prudish, but the casual nudity in the play in no way serves the narrative. It feels terribly contrived, as does the romantic dalliance between Maude and Ellen.

There are some bright spots, including several of the performances. Brian Mendes as Dead Man (the most human and alive character in the play!) shines overall and especially in a scene where he touchingly reads a letter written by Ellen's deceased husband.

Set designer Andromache Chalfant conveys an authentic "end of the world" environment in the downtown apartment, and Christine Frederickson's eerie sound effects help create the appropriately apocalyptic atmosphere.

The play ends on a pseudo-optimistic note that is hard

to take seriously, as it has in no way been prepared for or earned. Ellen waxes sentimental about the circumstances in the world around her and the rest of the characters, and would have us believe that she finds a "glimmer of hope" in a young African American character, Darius (Vladimir Versailles).

Implying that the world can be changed or saved through the young and unspoiled (why should they turn out differently than everyone else?) is a generic platitude unworthy of a serious dramatist.

There is no reason to believe that Rapp began writing *Through the Yellow Hour* with anything but the best of intentions. However, the intellectual carelessness and laziness, apparently wedded to the idea of "making it" at all costs, have resulted in a muddled and facilely misanthropic work.



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