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# 'Cuckoo': It's a Mad, Mad World

By WALTER LAZENBY

It's a mad world, my masters, as more than one recent literary work has proclaimed. That's part of the message of Ken Kesey's novel "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and of Dale Wasserman's stage adaptation, the Eastern Theatre Department's homecoming show.

As one self-conscious speech suggests, the script resembles a concoction brewed by Franz Kafka and Mark Twain.

There is an echo of Kafka in the haunting struggle between a strong authority-figure, the power-crazed head nurse in a state mental hospital, and a not-so-crazy individualistic newcomer to her ward who rallies the inmates against her and on whose side the weight of sympathy lies.

There is some Twain in the curiously light jests about these "psycho-ceramics" (you guessed it—crackpots!) but especially in the cynical parody of a wedding ceremony pronounced to give a virginal character permission to go through his initiation rite—with a prostitute sneaked into the ward.

But whereas Kafka would never clearly identify the threat to his heroes, Kesey is all too simplistically clear. For him, the evil is concentrated in Nurse Ratched (try punning and rhyming on

that one) and other castrating females like her (Billy Bibbit's mother and Chief Bromden's, who never appear).

Of course she can generally represent attitudes and institutions in our society which oppress the individual; and it may be this possibility as well as anti-feminist sentiment which causes audiences to clap, whistle, and cheer at her

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momentary defeats. But she is still the cardboard melodramatic villainess.

I suppose that an actress might try to give her more humanity by interpreting her as well-intentioned but misguided, though there is little warrant in the script for doing so. In Joan Allen's strong portrayal the villainess is surely there. She manages some heavily sardonic implications in Big Nurse's speech on the necessity of punishment and a little hypocrisy in the speech chiding her adversary for tampering, god-like, with other human lives. But some earlier speeches seem unnecessarily ponderous and self-aware. It is just possible that more restraint and

unruffled efficiency might make the character more perturbably sinister.

What of her more complicated worthy opponent, Randle P. McMurphy, played by Jim Kleckner? Is he really insane or only pretending to be? Is his early behavior motivated by the chance to win a bet, by deep concern for the men's depressed spirits and lifelessness, or by simple misogyny? Why does he persist in antagonizing Big Nurse after he finds out that he has been permanently committed, whereas many of his wardmates can be released when they no longer need refuge in the hospital?

Kleckner's playing does not give clear-cut answers, but neither does the script. Nevertheless he gives an assured performance, making Mac confident and intelligent, quick to develop strategies. Hence it is all the more surprising that the hero misses his chance to escape (but the novel lacks the play's contrivance at this point). With all his cleverness, has he failed to measure the threat Nurse Ratched poses?

Of the two different productions of "Cuckoo's Nest" I have seen this year, Gerald Sullivan's at Eastern is distinctly the better. It is richer in minor characterizations, lighter in its comic moments, more moving in its seriousness.

Clarence Blanchette's austere, solid, prison-like set contributes immensely to the creation of an appropriate depressing atmosphere, and in the dim-outs it becomes magnificently eerie, in accord with Chief Bromden's expressionistic soliloquies.

These soliloquies still seem like an awkward adaptor's device to me, but with the lighting and sound effects they work better here. Doug Lewis handles them successfully.

B.J. Heft conveys Harding's sophistication so well that one wonders at Harding's having been deceived about the aim of the humiliating group therapy sessions. Hence Heft's skill shows up another weakness in the script.

There is not a single false note in Randy Arney's (Billy Bibbit's) final tearful confrontation with Big Nurse. Yvette Coney creates a natural vignette of Nurse Nakamura; Phillips Wright gives a good comic caricature of Aide Turkle; and there are yet other performances in minor roles that might have come from Stanislavski's workshop.

Performances will continue in the Fine Arts Theatre at Eastern Illinois University at 8 p.m. Oct. 18, 19 and 21, and at 2 p.m. Oct. 20. Tickets are on sale at the Fine Arts box office for \$2 adults, \$1 for youths, and 75 cents for Eastern students.