

Theatre Arts Daily

by Mark Johnson

Review: “The North Pool” at Dragon Productions Theatre Company



Even the most major playwright has her fair share of minor works, the ones that tend to go by the wayside after the author's death. For every *Long Day's Journey Into Night* there is a *Desire Under the Elms*; every *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has

a *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Such is the case with Rajiv Joseph, the prolific and intelligent playwright whose *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was nominated for a Pulitzer in 2011, and whose *The North Pool*, an 85-minute two-character drama currently in production at Dragon Productions Theatre Company, carries with it the distinct note of being a footnote to larger works by the same author.

Taking place in a sterile, fluorescent principal's office at a public high school, *The North Pool* concerns a detention that senior Khadim has to serve for missing the last period of the day a week before the play's action. Dr. Danielson, the vice-principal of the school, gives Khadim an option to spend an hour in his office serving his detention, instead of the usual hour and a half, due to it being the very first hour of the school's spring break, provided he remains in Dr. Danielson's office to have a seemingly innocent chat. As can be expected, Dr. Danielson actually has far more on his mind than just chatting, and he begins to attempt to interrogate Khadim over concerns that he has about the school, much to Khadim's chagrin.

The structure of *The North Pool* will be familiar to many who have seen two-character realtime continuous action plays before. Two characters continuously argue while refusing to say exactly what they mean as the real truth is slowly pulled out of each character semi-involuntarily as the audience is left to piece the puzzle of the objective truth together. An expertly executed version of this play, such as David Harrower's stunning *Blackbird*, can be uniquely intense in its ability to trap you inside a theatre, but *The North Pool*, while clearly written by a man of immense talents, is far too unfocused and haphazardly constructed to be an exceptional example of the format. As the two characters begin to confront each other, the moment of realization, at which point every audience member understands precisely why they are watching the play they are, seems to arrive at six or seven different points, which is to say that there are six or seven different reasons that these characters are bothering to get so heated with each other, each reason seemingly unrelated and as important as the last. In the theatre, the play almost comes

across as if it were written without an end in mind, as evidenced by certain gaps in logic and no clear telos for the work. In this way, *The North Pool* reads as a writing exercise more than a fully fleshed-out drama.

This is not to say that *The North Pool* is without interest or merit. Joseph, as previously mentioned, is immensely talented on a moment-to-moment basis, his dialogue and method of spooning out exposition both exceptional. Joseph, as he is wont to do, has also tackled a spread of social issues here, from racism to fascism, and while he never offers complete conclusions on any of these issues, he connects them to each other in a way that is not often seen, making *The North Pool* still of certain interest as sociology, even if it doesn't necessarily succeed in whole as drama.

The current production of *The North Pool* at Dragon Productions Theatre Company in Redwood City is undoubtedly small, but packs a wallop. Salim Razawi perfectly captures the attitude of a high schooler trapped in a whirlwind of apathy and toxic masculinity and Edward Hightower is maddeningly good as a low-powered individual who longs to enact his own authoritarian regime on the earth, but will do it with a smile and an attitude that suggests friendly impotency. In short, he is every high school dean rolled together, and it works perfectly. Karl Haller's set could hardly be called a thing of beauty, but it's exactly right for the situation called for.

It wouldn't be a bad idea for Redwood City residents to head downtown and check out *The North Pool* before it closes on July 16th. There are enough elements of interest to make it worth your time, especially a killer two-person cast, but those elsewhere in the valley should feel no urgency to see such a slight work of art.

The North Pool runs in Redwood City, CA through July 16.