

The Mystic Who Roared

by Jim Link

Teresa, the new play at Greenbelt Arts Center, is the latest thought experiment, intellectual probe or moral goad from the prolific pen and fertile mind of Anthony Gallo.

For nearly four decades, Gallo, founder and presiding spirit of Seventh Street Playhouse, has been writing, directing and producing plays – 22 of his own, over 60 of others – that wrestle with serious issues that torture history's movers and shakers, often dissenters who have changed the world they have disturbed. Titles like *The Agony of David*, *The Last Days of King Solomon*, *Lincoln and God*, *Luther and Paul* show that Gallo always swings for the bleachers, never trifles with a prom night pimple or the rape of a lock.

Gallo's latest exploration of the paradoxes, mysteries and majesty of the human heart focuses on Teresa of Ávila, 16th century mystic and nun, who stubbornly challenged the rigid patriarchal counter-reformation church structure with her unorthodox visions, levitations and eventual founding of the order of Discalced Carmelite nuns.

Teresa's mystical ecstasy as the bride of Christ, depicted in her spiritual classic *The Interior Castle*, earned her the very unwelcome scrutiny of the Inquisition. Google images of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* to see how easily her visions could be quite carnally interpreted.

Moreover, Gallo informs us of Teresa's Marrano ancestry (Jewish converts to Christianity, often under duress), thus tainting her otherwise "pure" Christian blood.

Gallo's Teresa is vulnerable, mercurial, insecure, persistent, fiery and bold by turns. Emily Canavan gives a brave and convincing performance as the title character. She wrestles with feminist, theological and sexual issues throughout the play, occasionally even humorously. At one point the novice nun Norma, the wonderful Hazel Thurston (a high school junior), confesses to Teresa that she is sexually tempted by a married man; Teresa admits to being in a similar affair.

"With whom?" asks the shocked Norma.

"I am the bride of Christ," answers Teresa.

"I mean REAL men, not Jesus of Nazareth," says Norma.

The ever-competent director Beatrix Whitehall also plays Eufrosia, the mistress of King Philip, played by James McDaniel. McDaniel's Philip is complacent, charming and peremptory when need be. Eufrosia and Philip are a cozy couple indeed until Eufrosia's next moment is knocked



PHOTO BY PENNY MARTIN

The cast includes George Spencer (Brother Antonio), Margaret Bagley (Sister Maria), Renate Wallenberg (Sister Olga), Hazel Thurston (Novice Norma) and Emily Canavan (Teresa).

own ease of inconvenienced kings back in the day.

When I asked Grant Bagley how it felt to play both the wicked inquisitor and God (His voice, at least), he said, "Very gratifying. I never dreamed that at our age my wife (Margaret, who plays sister Maria) and I would take vows of obedience, sort of. But she still doesn't do what she's told," Bagley joked.

When I told Gallo I was surprised that not one word of the play was concerned with St. John of the Cross, Teresa's fellow

Spaniard, mystic and rebel gadfly, he said, "I had included him originally, but I kicked him out. This is Teresa's play, her moment."

Forty years after Teresa's death in 1582, the very flexible if not infallible Catholic Church canonized Teresa and declared her the first woman Doctor (thinker, philosopher, theologian) of the church in 1970. Her moment, indeed.

See the Seventh Street Playhouse ensemble on Friday, July 21 and Saturday, July 22 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, July 23 at 2 p.m.

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