



Calder Hudson reviews *The Pillowman*, directed by Alex Solheim and produced by Rebecca D'Souza, which went up 5th & 6th November in the Barron Theatre.

*The Pillowman* displayed Director Alex Solheim's confidence and ambition simply through her bold decision to direct it. *The Pillowman* depicts the abduction and questioning of Katurian K. Katurian (played by Stephen Quinn), a writer living under a totalitarian regime. Martin McDonagh's play proves, through its horrific eccentricity and foreboding sense of wit, that dark humor is at its most humorous when it is also at its darkest. Appropriately balancing the grotesque and the comedy of *The Pillowman* is an almost unachievable aspiration, but despite the size of this obstacle, Solheim and her cast did admirably in their pursuit of it.

Solheim made a number of distinctions between her performance and McDonagh's script, though none of these involved cutting down the play's length. In total, *The Pillowman* lasted over two and a half hours. Though this might at first seem a criticism, it is worth mentioning that the performance would have been weakened considerably had it been any shorter. McDonagh's script provides enough variation to captivate an invested audience (though, notably, this requires the audience to be continually invested), so *The Pillowman*'s considerable length was not problematic, though at times Solheim's production moved somewhat slowly. The finest example of this lethargy was the play's opening scene, which lacked all the sharpness required to introduce the play's cruel-but-comedic characters. Especially considering the contrasting strength of its successor scene, the first scene of *The Pillowman* undoubtedly proved to be the play's weakest point. The derisive and sardonic relationship between Katurian's interrogators, Ariel and Tupolski (Lennart Ardeal and Eveliina Kuitunen), possessed neither energy nor jocularity; the dry wit within their partnership was pushed aside to make them a more intimidating force, but in that department they once again missed the mark. Throughout their introduction, the pair's comic delivery lacked any embellishment, and any fear they ought to have incited was also absent. With neither bark nor bite, Ardeal and Kuitunen lacked the ability to immerse the audience and were also so unimposing that they made Katurian's anxiety irrational.

Thankfully, the play's second scene succeeded where the first had faltered. One of Solheim's aforementioned alterations to McDonagh's play was the decision to cast Akaina Ghosh as Katurian's brother, Michal. Both Tupolski and Michal, intended by McDonagh to be male, were played by women; Solheim's cross-casting was beneficial in that she wisely decided to make her audition process an uncomplicated meritocracy. Had Ghosh been a man, a woman, or a fish, the actress would have been right for her part; she

captured Michal impeccably while simultaneously picking up the energy of the performance in its entirety. This was aided by Ghosh's chemistry with Quinn; in their scene together, the two excellently fleshed out the palpable wit and heartbreaking humanity within McDonagh's piece.



Stephen Quinn as Katurian K. Katurian

Ghosh's stellar performance served as a rallying point upon which *The Pillowman* capitulated in its second half. Therein, Ardeal and Kuitunen returned to the stage with renewed fervour. Though their teamwork was still not nearly as profound as the chemistry between Ghosh and Quinn, both performed well in relation. It was in *The Pillowman*'s second half that Ariel and Tupolski ascended to their full potential—especially through their contrasting speeches, which each separately delivers unto Katurian—and in these moments, the play prospered.

Technically, *The Pillowman* made great advantage of its venue. The Barron Theatre's malleability proved excellent for the quick-but-drastic scene changes and stark minimalism that *The Pillowman* required. The harshness of the play's visual aesthetic did it great favors, and although the Barron's limited choices for lighting can often leave much to be desired, *The Pillowman* proudly flaunted the fully-realized benefits of a black box theater. From a technical standpoint, Solheim's vision cannot be credibly criticized; her complete commitment to an austere simplicity fortified the play against artistic adversity.

Ultimately, Solheim's decisions concerning her source material were well-made across the board. Having wisely refrained from shearing McDonagh's play in order to shorten it, and having made all the right decisions in terms of casting and coordinating her technical assets, Solheim certainly understood how to use her available resources to their utmost capacity—and the result produced several moments of true grandeur, despite the imbalance between the horror and humor that prove so important and so unique to its script.

*The Pillowman*'s comedic elements should not be undermined by its horrific content, just as its horrific content should not be trivialized by its comedic elements. When push comes to shove—even if it is about as gruesome as wittiness can get—*The Pillowman* is inescapably funny, and audiences will feel a desire to laugh with it while also being counselled against such behavior by their collective consciences. While Solheim's direction did not expound upon the full extent of its subject matter's witticisms, it nonetheless deserves credit for being a testament to the spirit of McDonagh's play, conveyed with passion and purpose. The end product, as it has to be said, was wonderful because it was “just a little bit peculiar.”

Calder Hudson

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