

'Someone to Watch Over Me' adroitly handled by cast, director

By TAMARA LE
Showcase Theater
Critic

"Someone to Watch Over Me" plays at the West End Studio Theatre in Portsmouth through Nov. 25. (Sophia Piel/Courtesy photo)



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The hauntingly tender sound of Ella Fitzgerald's voice wrapped around George Gershwin lyrics sets the stage. A love story? Or one of emotional indigence? "I'm a little lamb who's lost in a wood, I know I could always be good, To one who'll watch over me. Won't you tell him please to put on some speed, Follow my lead, Oh, How I need, Someone to watch over Me." Cue lights to dim. Sound of chains dragging across a concrete floor. This is not your Aunt Bea's theater. The intimate performance space at W.E.S.T. is transformed and the convivial patrons of New Hampshire Theater Project's "Someone Who'll Watch Over Me" (through Nov. 25) fall silent as they find themselves in a squalid, dank cell in Beirut. It's 1986 and inches away are hostages; an American, an

Irishman and an Englishman. Or are they dogs? Sitting chained to a pole, lying on flattened mats; one precious container of water within reach. An Islamic Jihadist guard skulks about, preying on their fears, denying any other form of stimulation. A reason or rationale as to why they were kidnapped is never offered. Madness and death hover. Adapted from Brian Keenan's real life, harrowing story ("An Evil Cradling") about being held captive for nearly five years in Lebanon, playwright Frank McGuinness' script doesn't wallow in any would-have-been-easy to stage brutalities. Instead, the audience sits as voyeurs [EM] watching and feeling with brilliant clarity and empathy how the men dealt with being lambs in a world of power-hungry wolves. Then, laughter; lots of uproarious, unabashed laughter. Chuckles, guffaws, belly laughs [EM] the secret to these captives' survival. Laughter keeps them safe and sane and in control ... jokes about sex, impressions of the Queen mum, jokes about football and family. The more outrageous the better. But, as with anything truthfully funny, there is bridled pain [EM] and fear [EM] brewing underneath. Unlike the book, where the guards play a starring role, the stage version gives nary a word of dialogue to the kidnappers. Perhaps McGuinness felt it would validate them and their actions. Director Genevieve Aichele crafts a mastery of understatement by leaving the actors on stage during intermission, anonymously chained to poles under dim lights. The audience moves to the lobby, chatting over wine, fine chocolates and pear flan, continuing on with their daily lives. Most likely just as we all would have during Keenan's incarceration. The relationships that develop between the captives are raw yet delicate, judgmental yet protective and caustic yet intimate. The best part is the audience gets to feel everyone of them deeply. The show pulsates to life though through the discerning and penetrating talents of the cast, most notably Blair Hundertmark (Edward) and Peter Motson (Michael). As an Irish journalist and classic English literature teacher respectively, the micro-political irony of such a relationship in an apolitical piece proves delicious. Hundertmark's performance is one to be cherished. He takes on Edward's visceral Irish soul with wit, fire and uncompromising command. His range as an actor is boundless as he banters, provokes and sobs freely. He then has the audacity to ingratiate himself upon the hearts of the audience as he fantasizes about making love to his wife and having another child, all the while snuggling with the cold, steel chain binding him to a pole. In the end it is Edward's having so much to live for that enables him to survive. Motson counters with alchemy and an authentic affinity for the refined that only a proper Englishman could master. Widowed and otherwise nearly alone in the world, his tender, erudite nature leaves

him pegged as the runt of the pack. Yet, in his frailty, he also becomes the Spartanesque champion of the play. Such intricacies of character would be lost on an actor any less canny or capable. It is not until the very end, when only Motson is left in the cell, that the meek surrenders. To laugh alone would be to admit to one's madness, no doubt. Balancing the bickering is a softer, introspective American character played by Brian Chamberlain (Adam). A young psychologist, Adam believes his survival hinges upon his emotional sanity.

Intellectualizing his own madness from the outside in, Chamberlain remains calm, almost to a fault much of the time. While his methodical, routine push-ups are used as a metaphor for control, I remained unconvinced there was any tension forcing itself from his psyche. It is in his letting go, during his spiral downward, that he offers his best work.

As physical torture of the prisoners is only implied, so too could the monotony of being isolated be portrayed without extraneous, directed pauses. The first act runs long (nearly ninety minutes) and the pace needs to be quickened to capitalize on the frightening uncertainty of the prisoners' continued existence. The real takeaway of this show was crystallized by Keenan himself more than a decade after his release and perhaps will give us all something to think and talk about as we gather in lobbies in the future. "Just as I was chained in darkness for almost five years, my captors were chained to their guns in a profound darkness I could see into. Tell me now, who is the prisoner here?"