

THEATER REVIEW 'Baal' ★★★

Sleazy charm offensive, but it's also intoxicating

By Chris Jones
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The very early plays of a very young Bertolt Brecht have proved to be quite a tonic for TUTA. Lovers of the Eurocentric avant-garde found artistic director Zeljko Djukic and his ensemble-driven Chicago company years ago, but these embryonic Brechts seem to have awakened something more intense inside this hitherto over-earnest company — like lusty humor, an earthy sexuality and some primal song.

So it went with TUTA's excellent winter production of "The Wedding," the 1919 depiction of the nuptials from hell penned by Brecht before he became Mr. Alienation. And so it surely goes with "Baal," a sexually charged Brecht play from 1918 that introduces us to the maverick titular poet, an artsy outsider who uses and throws away his enthusiastic lovers with



Ian Westerfer and Stacie Beth Green in Bertolt Brecht's "Baal."

spectacular abandon.

You may or may not care to see a play wherein an attractive but wholly amoral young man abuses those he holds in his

sexual (and sexist) thrall. And there are certainly those who might object to this lingerie-heavy show from a gender-politics point of view. (One recent New York production tried to get around this conundrum by casting an actress as Baal.) But unlike, say, "Nine," which follows a similarly desirable but questionable hero, "Baal" is not about a jerk turning the romance on and off. It's an intensely evocative show — carrying you in its sleazy arms from the outer lobby of the Chopin Theatre basement into its creative subterranean crucible. You find yourself pondering how Baal may have been a prototypical version of the edgy rock star, hopelessly drunk on the marketability of his own mind and body. Although Brecht found his first play politically naive in his later years, he may well have been more prescient as to the global cultural trajectory than he first realized.

Djukic has a variety of beautiful young woman oscillating around the play's hero, including actresses Lindsey Gavel, Stacie Beth Green and Rachel Rizzuto. And in Ian Westerfer, he has a Baal who can pull off the excessive rock star routine rather well. Westerfer's magnet for sexual favors re-

minded me of those guys I knew at the end of high school; kids who'd break hearts only to be rewarded by a bevy of readily available whole ones, craving further predictable destruction.

Not only does this show send one spiraling off in that direction, it contains a superb original score by Joshua Schmidt. Schmidt, who composed "Adding Machine: A Musical," is one of those remarkable artists who is quite happy unleashing world-class work from a Wicker Park basement. Schmidt's little clutch of songs are wholly in the right guttural gestalt, and several of these melodies are now rooted in my skull. Especially the stirring music that bookends the show.

"Baal" is still a rather confounding piece that certainly resists any linear trajectory, and it will wear out its welcome for some. An intermission would have been a good idea. But with the helps of designer Brandon Wardell's hemmed-in, daylight-free world and Peter Tegel's clear translation, this feels to me like a strikingly powerful vista of so much that was to come and wreak such havoc on our bodies and souls.

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