

Von Horvath's Devastating Train Wreck; Numbers Game: John Simon

By John Simon - Jul 20, 2010



Actors Eric Miller, left, and Dashiell Eaves in "Judgment Day" in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. The production, by Odon von Horvath, runs through this weekend as part of SummerScape at Bard College. Photographer: Cory Weaver/Bard College via Bloomberg

There are serious literary figures who consider Odon von Horvath, the Austro-Hungarian playwright and novelist, the equal of [Bertolt Brecht](#), despite his brief biography.

At age 36, he escaped from Hitler's Austria to Paris. Less than three months later, in 1938, he sought shelter from a thunderstorm on the Champs-Elysees, only to be killed by a falling tree branch.

Though best known for the bitter comedy "Tales from the Vienna Woods," "Judgment Day" -- now at Bard College's SummerScape festival -- is no less worthy.

A mostly young American cast directed by Caitriona McLaughlin performs the play at the [Fisher Center's](#) Theater Two, which, unfortunately, is part of the problem.

Theater Two's stage is a long, wide corridor with tracks for a movable platform, and 180 spectators seated in three rows on its sides. This allows for only minimal scenery and often rather strenuous sight angles which create an unsolicited alienation effect.

The play concerns a small-town station master, young Thomas Hudetz, unhappily married to a woman 13 years his senior, who, like her druggist brother, is considered insufferably snooty and hated by the townsfolk. Thomas is pitied and respected.

Flirty Talk

One day the local innkeeper's daughter, Anna, and her out- of-town butcher fiance, Ferdinand, are waiting for the always late train. When all but Anna leave, she engages Thomas in a rather flirty conversation.

Mischievously aware that Mrs. Hudetz is watching from the apartment above, Anna passionately kisses the indignant Thomas. He neglects an important signal and the collision kills 18 people.

All sorts of persons are drawn into the ensuing investigation, including Anna, the presumed only witness, who, like Thomas, insists on his innocence. Not so Mrs. Hudetz, who claims to have seen otherwise.

On the testimony of Anna, Hudetz is eventually set free, but feelings of guilt torment both of them, and profoundly affect both Mrs. H. and her brother, even as the fickle townsfolk stupidly shift allegiances according to which way the wind is blowing. Tragedy ensues.

Zoom, Zoom

In the end, "Judgment Day" has the dead confronting the living while trains keep zooming inexorably just out of sight.

It is a curiously religious play, with God barely mentioned, yet some kind of superhuman morality holding sway.

Most of the acting is accomplished, although Hayley Treider is not quite up to Anna's complexity. Craig Bockhorn and Shawtane Bowen are a shade too obvious as her father and fiancé.

The director has handled things with effective suspense, and [Christopher Hampton](#)'s translation, save for a couple of uncalled-for expletives, is faithfully on target. It may be that Matt Tierney, the sound designer, has indulged himself in apocalyptic train noises -- more like earthquakes -- but since the trains assume symbolic significance, this may be permissible.



Actors Hayley Traider and Kevin O'Donnell in "Judgment Day" in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. The play, by Odon von Horvath, runs through this weekend as part of SummerScape at Bard College. Photographer: Cory Weaver/Bard College via Bloomberg

Through July 25 at Bard College in Annandale-On-Hudson on Route 9G and Annandale Road.
Information: +1-845-758-7900; <http://fishercenter.bard.edu> Rating: ***