

## Crashing into morality

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

*Last Updated:* 10:58 AM, July 19, 2010

*Posted:* 12:42 AM, July 19, 2010

While most summer festivals tend to focus on one genre, the offerings of Bard College's SummerScape cover theater and dance, music and film. It's hard not to find something to like, and it's even harder to beat the setting: the gleaming, Richard Gehry-designed Fisher Performing Arts Center in bucolic Annandale-on-Hudson. (A bus even makes a door-to-door round trip from New York City for some performances.)

Alongside downtown acts such as Jackie Hoffman, this year's edition -- which runs until Aug. 22 -- focuses on German-speaking artists from the early 20th century: a retrospective of film director G.W. Pabst, a production of Oscar Straus' 1908 operetta "The Chocolate Soldier," a tribute to Alban Berg. And for theater buffs, there's the 1937 play "Judgment Day" by Austro-Hungarian playwright Odon von Horvath.



Cory Weaver

**Distracted by a girl (Hayley Trierder), a station master (Kevin O'Donnell) causes a fatal derailment in "Judgment Day," part of Bard College's German-flavored SummerScape.**

While barely heard of here, Horvath's enjoying renewed popularity in Europe, where some hold him as an equal to his contemporary Bertolt Brecht. Based on "Judgment Day," we have some serious catching up to do.

Translated by Christopher Hampton ("Dangerous Liaisons"), the hard-hitting work revolves around a train wreck -- a real one that acquires allegorical status.

Momentarily distracted by flirtatious young Anna (Hayley Treider), station master Hudetz (Kevin O'Donnell) is late flipping a switch and causes a lethal derailment. But is he really guilty of killing 18 people? After all, Hudetz proudly points out, he's a model employee who's never missed a signal in his life. He convinces himself he can't possibly be responsible.

The situation acquires a sinister edge with hindsight: Von Horvath lived in Berlin and was well aware of what National Socialism meant. "Judgment Day" feels prescient in the way it questions passive responsibility and the poisonous consequences of conformity.

While the cast is uneven, director Caitriona McLaughlin has devised a visually striking production in which the audience sits on either side of the stage, looking down on the actors. The ominous rumble of the passing trains, a red light blinking like a wounded Cyclops' eye, lots of atmospheric dry ice -- this is a bleak landscape.

When the day of reckoning comes at last, it feels both natural and inevitable. And it's Bard's chirping birds and landscaped paths that look strangely out of place.

*"Judgment Day" plays through July 25 at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson; 845-758-7900; [fishercenter.bard.edu/summerscape](http://fishercenter.bard.edu/summerscape).*