

‘Alias Grace’ leaves questions

Harold Duckett

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Just what is Clarence Brown Theatre’s new production of playwright Jennifer Blackmer’s adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s 1996 novel “Alias Grace” really about?

Set on the grounds of the Kingston Penitentiary in Ontario, Canada, in 1859, the play is, on the surface, about the murders committed by the real Irish-Canadian immigrant maid Grace Marks, who was convicted of killing her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery in 1843.



Brenda Orellana as “Grace Marks” by Brynn Yeager

It’s also about the public controversy stirred up over whether Marks really did it or was just an unwitting accessory to the real ax-murderer, handyman James McDermott (Brady Moldrup). Did McDermott know the secrets of the house and take revenge for the women he quietly loved?

Since great theater is almost always effective social commentary, this play is also about the sexual politics of power that authority figures have over subordinate women, maybe women in general, sometimes even when the authority is wielded by another woman.

Consider, for instance, Mark’s comments that women servants are expected to perform some of their duties flat of their backs, underneath their male employers, the outcome of which caused the death of fellow servant Mary Whitney (Emily Cullum). Brenda Orellana’s Marks, pitch-perfect, with flawless stoicism and Irish brogue, also recounts the repeated attempts by housekeeper Nancy Montgomery (Emily Helton) to seduce her.

But judging from stage designer Becca Johnson’s bare stage, onto which the minimal of props – alternately a couple of chairs, a bench and a table—are moved on and off, the central theme may be the emerging psychological disciplines of psychoanalysis and hypnotism (moved 30 years from their actual development in the 1890s), revealed through the ubiquitous presence of Dr. Simon Jordan (Brian Gligor), never off-stage.

Just like the furniture that’s slipped over the edge of the stage, it’s the analyst’s job to push everything superfluous out of the way of getting to the essentials. What remains is the quilts Marks pieces together, symbolic of the bits of recollections she tells Jordan, some of which are told one day and denied the next.

Then there’s the character of Rachel Lavell (Katie Norwood Alley), the private prison owner and wannabe therapist, whose husband is more of an idea than a real man, created to give her credibility in a man’s world. Her importance to

this drama is emphasized by her fancy, elaborate dress.

She comes up with investment schemes for a new hospital built especially for Dr. Jordan's new kind of work, with her as a partner, of course.

Jordan, initially excited about the prospect of a supportive investor, rejects Lavell's idea.

The remaining character is Jeremiah (Tim Decker), an itinerate con artist and snake oil salesman, who comes in and out of the play peddling his collection of fakes and trinkets.

After Jordan rejects Lavell's scheme, Jeremiah shows up again as the charlatan hypnotist Jerome Dupont, either victimizing Lavell, or as her second try to persuade Jordan. Whether his session with Grace is itself fake, along with Grace's habitation of the spirit of the deceased Mary Whitney, may reflect the sense that the hypnotism a lot of hooey, even though the 1850s were primetime for the Fox Sisters, whose seances were influential sensations among the classes with enough money to pay their fees and a big factor in the public uproar.

However one chooses to think about all this, whether it's (1) a look at a strange young murderess, or (2) a look at how early mental health procedures got their start, with young Grace as a sideshow, "Alias Grace" is a totally absorbing drama, craftily directed by Karen Kessler, that flashes by in two short hours.

"Alias Grace" runs through Oct. 14. It is being performed in the Ula Love Doughty Carousel Theatre. So there are fewer tickets than for plays in the main theater. Tickets may be purchased at www.clarencebrowntheatre.com, or by calling the box office at 865-974-5161.