

Theatre Passe Muraille experiments with racism in **White Mice**

By Johanna Kristolaitis

Upon entering the small performance space of Theatre Passe Muraille, you might not know what to expect from the play to come.

The set design for Darren O'Donnell's *White Mice* is strikingly simple and complex: globes of various sizes, constructed by Erika James, clutter everywhere other than the main playing area. A huge orange cheese wheel waits for the mice. The door behind a table and chairs functions as a mouse hole in a wall. Electronic music creeps in, and an unseen voice begins the introduction before the house and stage lights dim.

The production examines how racism is nearly inescapable because it has become part of our society's structure and functioning. You may be thinking: "Oh great, another lesson on diversity and understanding." But you would be wrong.

This play is by no means an afterschool special.

The premise is simple enough: two brother mice living together discuss issues concerning white mice and mousekind. The production quality, acting and directing of *White Mice* are virtually inextricable since Darren O'Donnell, the production's playwright, also directs and performs in the piece.

Although self-direction is unsuccessful in some stage productions, this was not the case in *White Mice*. Both O'Donnell and Bruce Hunter were marvelous in their character portrayals of Douglas and Robert.

While O'Donnell lost his "mouseness" at times and became something like a university lecturer, this was not entirely out of character: Robert seemed to need this change in order to get the information out of his system, and into his brother's ears.

And while we do not discover the motive behind these discussions until much later in the play, it is always clear that the characters are focused on their superobjectives. However, improving the physical aspect of Robert would improve O'Donnell's overall performance, particularly in comparison with Hunter's superbly mousy physicality. By absorbing the physicality of the mouse so strongly, Hunter risked going over the top and losing some of the character's depth.

Unfortunately, this occurred at a few points during the evening's performance. The comic timing of this duo was so close to perfection that the laughter came before the seriousness of the matter was realized. It was somewhat odd to be laughing at a tense subject, but Hunter and O'Donnell were so genuine during the production's comic moments that the outbreak of guffaws seemed only natural.

In the end, the production's simple approach to a complex subject combined with the hard work of *White Mice*'s cast and crew melded together to create an amazing, thought-provoking and entertaining night of theatre which should not be missed.

White Mice runs at Theatre Passe Muraille (16 Ryerson Ave) until October 15.

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