



TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: QUESTIONING "SOCRATES"

SOCRATES ** out of ****
PUBLIC THEATER

I felt nervous at the start of the new play by actor Tim Blake Nelson. Not because it's a three hour drama about the philosopher Socrates. Heck, plays tackling big ideas -- plays like *Arcadia* and *Copenhagen* and *New Jerusalem* and *Isaac's Eye* -- are my idea of a feast. I wasn't nervous even though, for some reason, the outfits of ancient Greece and Rome distract me as "costumes" in ways that clothes from other eras simply don't.

No, I was nervous because after an awkward and unnecessary framing device, the play begins with a raucous party. Everyone is laughing uproariously and quite drunk and you desperately want to catch up and share their mirth. But it just isn't happening, even as Socrates is lovingly roasted at length by the handsomest and most popular figure in all of Athens. Pair that with Plato's bland assurance that we're about to visit "a world more full of wit, passion and above all ideas than anything you ever imagined possible" and your heart sinks.

That framing device is a hoary one. The great Socrates (Michael Stuhlbarg) has been executed for corrupting the youth of Athens and more to the point offending its high and mighty. Nonetheless, a Boy (Niall Cunningham) has shown up on the doorstep of Plato (Teagle F. Bougere) and in a rather sullen mood demands to be educated. Plato tells the Boy what everyone wants to know. How could this happen? How could the greatest mind of his age be murdered by the proudest democracy in the world, a society that values the free exchange of ideas? And how could the friends of Socrates -- Plato very much among them -- allow it to happen?

What follows is precisely what one would expect. In this static and un-involving drama, Socrates wanders the city of Athens, probing and asking questions of one and all. He has a devoted band of followers



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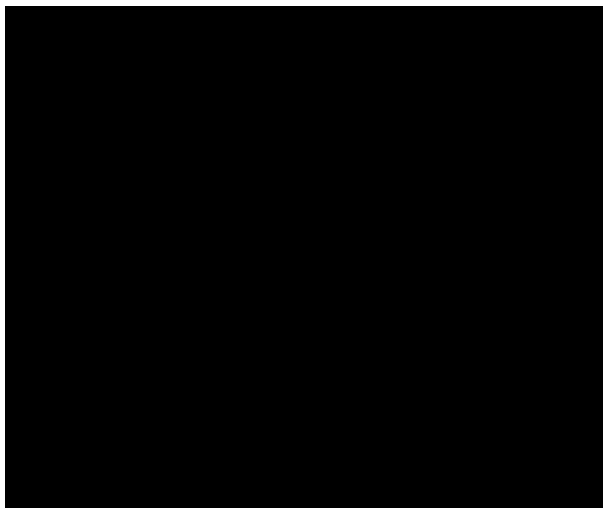
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like the quiet and observant Plato, along with an entourage of young men who love learning how to question authority...and thus drive their parents nuts. Socrates begins gently and playfully, but most arguments end with him piercing the intellectual armor of one and all.

That's fine when dealing with friends eager to debate weighty ideas. It's not so fine when Socrates mocks a well-connected poet or questions the very pillars of democracy in a way that the powerful see as traitorous. Socrates makes so many enemies -- notably by opposing the wholesale execution of military generals who failed in combat -- that he himself goes on trial. The charges are voluminous and contradictory. Socrates is condemned both for atheism and for worshipping false gods, for example. Yet, his self-absorbed code of ethics is so stringent that Socrates is unwilling to save himself or simply leave. Death seems inevitable.



Well, of course death is inevitable since -- spoiler alert! -- Socrates drinks the hemlock and dies. That knowledge is no barrier to a good play. But Tim Blake Nelson hasn't begun to dramatize the action. Director Doug Hughes and the fine cast do their best, led nobly by the always intelligent Stuhlbarg, but it never comes close to catching fire.

The biggest problem is that Socrates has no one to challenge him, emotionally or intellectually. His enemies are cardboard villains spitting out their hatred or so vain they don't even realize they're fools. One never doubts for a second his rightness. On the other hand, Socrates clearly allows himself to be executed. A better play might have taken him to task for possible vanity, for wanting a death to raise him to martyrdom. It's not ethics that doom this Socrates; it's ego.

Plato is the most devoted of disciples, but it's a silent form of worship, leaving a black hole of emotion where our narrator should be. And he's talking to a cipher when it comes to his pupil. At one point Plato says the Boy reminds him of Socrates. Really? That character has said virtually nothing, so how in god's name could the kid remind him of the greatest philosopher alive? Worse, the Boy responds that he

THEATER: "INK" STAINED
WRETCHES GET THEIR
DUE

THEATER: "TOOTSIE" IS A
DRAG

THEATER: "ALL MY SONS"
LACKS A FAMILY

THEATER: "HADESTOWN"
FINDS HEAVEN ON
BROADWAY

THEATER: "BURN THIS"
BARELY SMOLDERS

THEATER: THE PAIN OF "THE
PAIN OF MY
BELLIGERENCE"...

THEATER: QUESTIONING
"SOCRATES"

THEATER: "OKLAHOMA!" IS
OK THE SECOND TIME
AROUND!...

THEATER: LESS IS MORE AT
"MRS. MURRAY'S
MENAGERIE"...

THEATER: "THE CRADLE
WILL ROCK" PUTS YOU TO
SLEEP

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thought the same thing.

In an attempt to create some drama at the last moment, when execution looms the wife and a son of Socrates show up. They beg him to leave Athens and save his life. Their sense of abandonment might actually matter if they were characters throughout the play, rather than popping in at the end. (The wife also appears earlier for a brief scene.) How can we be upset about the son feeling his father doesn't love him when their goodbye is the first time we see the lad?

Bougere has a thankless role in Plato, but Robert Joy has the livelier, more human part of Crito. The rest fade into the background or have one-note parts they can do little with. That leaves Stuhlbarg, who brings his formidable talent to the part of Socrates and does what he can. While the story is inert emotionally, Stuhlbarg provides the necessary intellect and wit to this shambling questioner. Still, one feels him pushing for drama that simply isn't there when a handful of debates end with Socrates suddenly barking in rage.

Yet one scene works very well indeed. Socrates questions everyone and one day that practice takes him to a smithy who makes armor and weapons. Socrates peers intently as the man works a forge, asking questions. This leads to the idea of war and whether "right" wins or whether the victor simply decides they were right. The smithy (a good Lee Wilkof) is a bit out of his element and doesn't like it one bit. Is Socrates questioning the greatness of Athens, the shining light of democracy?

His rising temper doesn't deter Socrates, who probes and prods the man some more. Then the man says his own son died in battle. Even *that* can't stop Socrates. "But does that mean the Assembly is always right? Including sending your only son into battle? And am I right to take it therefore that it was right and just and good that your son was killed?" The man knocks Socrates down and starts beating him savagely and if Socrates felt he deserved it, we wouldn't be surprised.

For a moment, we see a man in search of truth, a man who will question anything and everything and put himself into grave danger, fully aware of what he's doing, choosing to do it and yet perhaps also incapable of not choosing to do it. For a moment, *Socrates* and Socrates both come alive.

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