

Theatre review: The Fever is raging at Azimuth's Living Room Playhouse

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL APRIL 25, 2014



Melissa Thingelstad in *The Fever*, at theatre no. 6

Photograph by: Ryan Parker, PK Photography

REVIEW

The Fever

Theatre: theatre no. 6

Directed by: Ian Leung

Starring: Melissa Thingelstad

Where: Azimuth Living Room Playhouse, 11315 106th Ave.

Running: through May 4

Tickets: TIX on the Square (780-420-1757, tixonthesquare.ca)

Artists and their audiences — people like us who “love theatre,” for example — are used to getting applauded for our liberal conscience and our basic social good will. We're well-meaning. Ah yes, too true, we concede at occasional moments of self-accusation, theatre often preaches to the converted. But still, c'mon, it's civilized, civilizing.

The Fever, now to be found raging at Azimuth's Living Room Playhouse, burns through all that like acid through skin. This isn't some spa exfoliation, followed by a nice moisturizer. Wallace Shawn's provocation about poverty and privilege, originally designed by its author to be taken to bourgeois living rooms, targets quite explicitly the people who go to see it.

It argues that works of art, both in their creation and their appreciation, haven't altered the corruption of the world one jot. In fact, they prop it up by enabling us to lie about ourselves, about our intentions that are in every aspect of our daily lives to entrench privilege and perpetuate the poverty that makes it possible.

Whether you see this paradox as bravely flagrant or perversely contradictory, you can't miss the point. It's nothing if not overt. It's presented in 90 minutes by a narrator (Melissa Thingelstad) who's nobody in particular, but all of us generally. She's a decent person who deplores violence, believes in kindness, generosity, compassion, charity, not to mention Beethoven and the bite of a violin bow applied to a string.

“I've always thought life is a gift; life should be celebrated.” She says “I like to go out at night in a cosmopolitan city ... and see dancers fly into each other's arms.”

That's you and I; that's Shawn, born into the New York blueblood literati (his dad was the editor of The New Yorker). In short, she has the civilized notions we share or aspire to share. That's why we're in the theatre, for heaven's sake, watching the return of theatre no. 6 after a five-year absence, in an Ian Leung production of The Fever, as re-worked by Shawn in 2012.

The narrator who seems to be trapped in a flashback that's also the present, or vice versa, wakes up shivering and feverish on a hotel bathroom floor “in a poor country where my language isn't spoken.”

The sickness that has come over the narrator starts with a tiny lethal question. If it's only fair and decent (a word often invoked in The Fever) to open your wallet and give something to a beggar or a poor chambermaid, “why not all you have?” The question, says the narrator, “could poison your life.”

And that's what happened to her, she says of her realization that the world and her place in it requires poverty in order to exist. We need the poor to be poor. After that, she says, “things that had once pleased me seemed to spoil. ...”

The gist is that, in a world of civilized enlightenment, where we're taught to explore our inner texts, our “decent” inward selves looking out, the narrator has suddenly caught a glimpse of herself and her life

from the outside. That's what's been hidden to us, our surfaces, the covers of our books of self. The content is a pretty slim volume.

I'm not giving anything away here. Although it escalates, *The Fever* doesn't really work the way plays work, although I must say both the lighting and the minimalist design here speak to theatrical expertise. I've seen it twice before — once in a performance that was deliberately dry, uninflected and flat, as if to underscore that the actor wasn't an actor "performing," and once in a performance in which the actor had an urbane and genial persona to shatter in perplexity.

Thingelstad's performance is different: perplexity, yes, at the way good humour and pleasure can be ruined, but underpinned by intense anger at what's happened. The latter occasionally cancels the dramatic sense that we're discovering the implications of the argument along with the narrator.

But then again, it's one of the mysteries of the piece whether the narrator is reviewing, or discovering. In any case, it's riveting to experience.

In the end, it's an all-or-nothing proposition. Our doling out of gradual improvements in the lives of the poor doesn't cut it, says *The Fever*. The narrator is stuck, and us with her. "Sympathy doesn't change the life of the poor." Neither does theatre-going. What exactly does change the life of the poor is a matter for the post-show arguments.

lnicholls@edmontonjournal.com

Read more about local theatre in *Stagestruck*, a blog by Liz Nicholls, at edmontonjournal.com/blogs

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal

Previous

Next



Melissa Thingelstad in *The Fever*, at theatre no. 6

Photograph by: Ryan Parker, PK Photography

