

When paternity suits

By Robert Cushman

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Jason Byrne, the Irish director responsible for a string of fine productions with Company Theatre plus one at the Shaw Festival, seems to specialize in plays about dysfunctional families. Admittedly the majority of plays involve families to some degree, and very few of them are functional; it would be hard to make them dramatically interesting if they were. (And probably untrue to life as well.) Still, Byrne goes to extremes: with *A Whistle in the Dark*, *Festen*, *The Cherry Orchard* and now, in a co-production with Canadian Stage, *The Test*, the English-language premiere of a play by a German-Swiss dramatist Lukas Bärfuss. It may be the most scarifying of all, and it feels like a masterpiece.

The test in the title is a paternity test. Peter Korach is, or has always believed himself to be, the son of Simon Korach and is a devoted husband and father on his own account. Simon is a politician, about to run for civic office - mayor, or something like it - against a certain Herr Gruber who has already defeated him three straight times. Peter now comes to doubt the legitimacy of his own baby son. These doubts were planted by Franzeck, a young man whom Simon rescued years ago from alcoholism and a park bench, and who has become his indispensable aide-de-camp. Franzeck may be the closest any dramatist has come to creating a modern Iago, and like Iago he has degraded his victim's words along with his thoughts. The temptation has taken place before the play starts; the first thing we hear is a measured, murderous tirade delivered by Peter that, since its fantasies concern a child as well as a wife, actually surpasses Othello's in nastiness.

Franzeck's motives are slightly more scrutable than Iago's. He hardly had a family himself; he used to, he tells us, come home to a wizened apple, intended not as food but as a note from his mother telling him not to wait up. (Always the same note and the same apple. She was thrifty.) Virtually adopted by the Korachs, he would now like to make it legal. He moved into Peter's room when Peter moved out, and he wants to keep it that way. He also has designs on Peter's wife, though he says outright that he doesn't find her attractive, and seems indeed to be virtually asexual. He's in a classic love-hate relationship with the Korachs, and what seems to be their old money. Peter's wife Agnes is frantic to hold on to him, despite everything and even at the expense of their child; interestingly, in a play largely composed of duologues in every possible permutation, Peter and Agnes never get a scene together. Helle, Simon's wife, is away at an Indian ashram when the trouble starts, but returns at Simon's insistence, though it's Franzeck who has to make the phone calls.

It all threatens to interfere terribly with Simon's anti-Gruber campaigning, about which he's passionate in a ferrety sort of way. Though he does at one point

threaten to pull out of the race, and when asked how he could possibly abandon the city to his detested opponent, shrugs and says "he's not so bad": a moment that's the most penetrating and hilarious commentary on the political game that I've heard in years. The paternity issue, meanwhile, works its way genealogically upwards: a case of the sins of the sons being visited on the fathers. Closer to the ground, so to speak, is the matter of Simon's feet; it seems to be everybody's responsibility to attend to his foot bath, and when his feet get scalded his screams threaten to wake the furies.

Hardly less scarifying are the sound effects laid on by Richard Feren. In other respects Byrne's production takes a measured, casual approach to arrive at moments that are charged with feeling or, even more powerfully, chillingly devoid of it. The latter belong chiefly to Philip Riccio's Franzeck, an extraordinary performance that gets inside the soul of an apparachik, he hits the right note - of a man with a piece missing that may even constitute a kind of innocence - from the start and never loses it, even when it's revealed that this demon too has demons. Gord Rand, who always seems slightly Russian, plays Peter as a man who maybe once had innocence but has forever lost it, leaving him a shell; his performance in the second act is a remarkable feat of repose and relaxation. The inwardness of all the performances lends the production a singular density of texture, though it sometimes reaches the point of actual inaudibility: something that shouldn't be excusable but this time maybe is. Liisa Repo-Martell's Agnes, in particular, registers fearsome, feral emotional extremes in ways that are as much facial as vocal; she can also, when she picks herself up, be as cool a customer as any of them.

Byrne is noted for giving his actors plenty of latitude. Revisiting the show two nights after the premiere, I couldn't detect many changes in blocking, but the balance of performances seemed to have altered. On the first night it was Riccio who grabbed me, perhaps because of his sheer unexpectedness. At second viewing the show belonged to Eric Peterson's Simon, tetchy and mercurial, a residue of civic and family concern floating in a sea of self-pity. His political program, as he outlines it in a brilliant soliloquy, seems to involve both derailing the gravy train and changing the city so no one will recognize it when he's through, but mostly it seems to be running on malice. He rejoices in finally not having to be "considerate of others - alone and free."

The play suggests that you can almost get away with this but not quite; humanity does have a habit of making its needs felt. It carries real pain, private and public. It can also be, in Birgit Schreyer Duarte's excellent translation, laugh-out-loud funny, even if its audience may not always feel much like laughing.