Play Review

Multinational [G]rape Corporation written and directed by Ozgur Cinar, performed by Ozgur Cinar and Chara Berk. 2010.

Reviewed by: Aaron Henry[1]

"Welcome to the market time. Everything has turned into a market today ergo it is not that surprising to see urinals exhibited in museums". Enter Multinational [G]rape Corporations (MGC), the play that took this year's Ottawa Fringe Theatre and Arts festival by storm, winning the outstanding original work award. Yet reviews of this play, for the most part, have entirely missed what is truly outstanding about it. While several reviews have praised the actors, who were indeed electrifying, or marveled over the irreverence and the spectacle of the play, none of them have discussed the meaning of this play. The meaning has been largely shoved aside, one reviewer even went so far as to suggest that "it defies explanation" (Marr, 2010). This is disappointing because it is in the structure of the play where Cinar's brilliance, the play's originality and its message lie. It is, then, the architecture of the play that needs to be given attention, if MGC is going to be reviewed for not just its spectacle but for its internal content. However, the two are necessarily interdependent.

The set of the play is austere. It features a table and two chairs upstage, a suitcase full of different props and two squares on the floor formed by red-tape labeled security. The play opens with a man and a women vomiting through a slit in the closed curtain while eating and drinking behind it, a married couple who are the key subjects of the play. The play scrolls through many different locales in capitalist society, ranging from the interior of an immigration office where the man is made to pay over and over again to gain permanent residency; a doctor's office where tapeworms are removed from the woman—played indomitably by Chara Berk—

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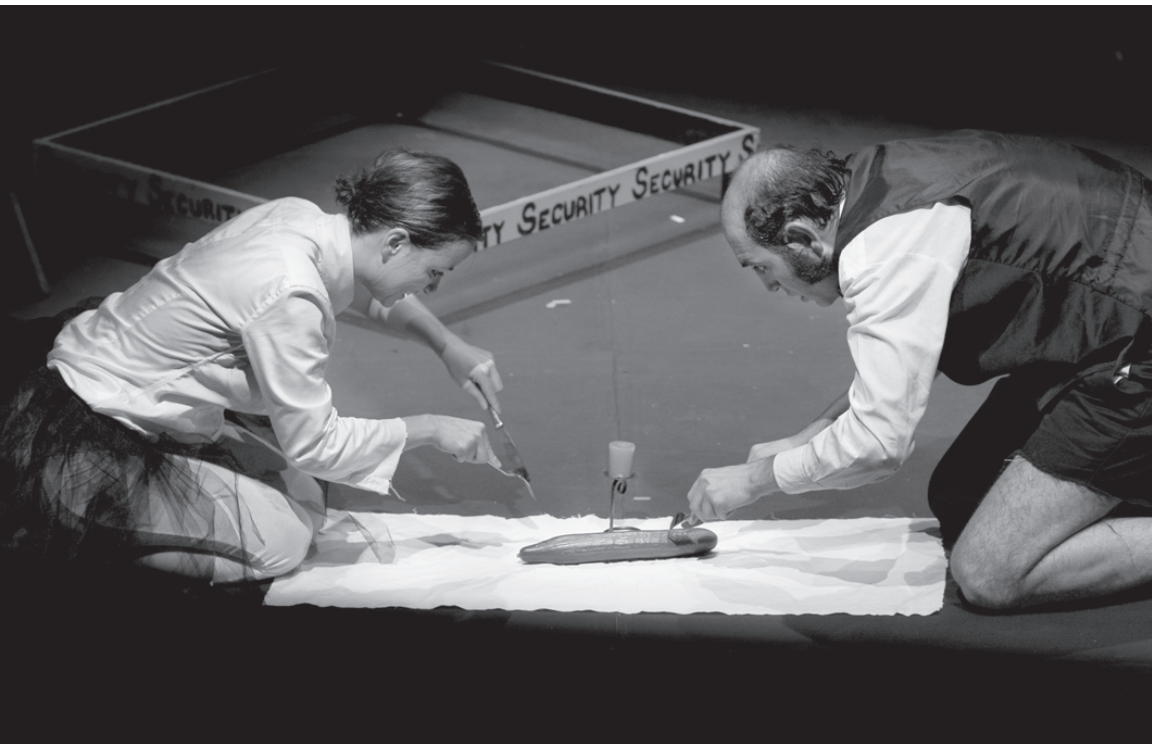
where, as a consequence, the doctor informs her of not eating organic food; the first date between the married couple, to a scene of protest against exploitation. Each of these scenes closes with the couple's retreat to the table. The next scene begins with the transformation of the woman, following a sound cue that imitates defecation, into an advertisement for different products and services ranging from fair-trade coffee, CDs or for a holiday vacation. Following this metamorphosis of the woman into a commodity, the couple retreats into their respective security boxes where the man, played by Cinar, attempts to commit suicide over and over again to no avail.

This structure has a number of important effects that taken together form Cinar's critique of capitalist society—a critique that goes far beyond being merely anti-consumerist and anti-security, as other reviewers have commented on. Foremost, the play is presented as a number of instances between subjects. The thread of unity that binds these instances is not that of unified characters with a linear narrative but the existence of the market within these relations. This is perhaps epitomized by the scene where the man applies for a study permit and then a permanent residency card to integrate into Canada. This scene unfolds as primarily a monetary

relationship between the man and the Canadian immigration officer who remains alienated from the man and treats him from a distance established by both the cash relationship and the sterile rationality of the bureaucracy. Similarly, on the couple's first date the romantic evening is disrupted as the woman laments that she must "take a dump" but that they can't afford access to a toilet. The scene sublimates the tender moment of the couple back into the market. The love between them cannot exist without the commodification of the most basic and biological human needs.

MGC produces its scenes around subjects that are produced by market relations. This forecloses on the unified character one would find in the classic plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Wilde, Synge, etc. and substitutes this character for a fragmented subject that develops and disappears in line with the market relations that Cinar exposes. The play progresses not as a linear narrative but as a process of interaction between fragmented subjects as the man and woman transform before the audience, into police officers, immigration officials, doctors, waiters and lovers. The subjects are then formed in context to the power relations that develop within capitalist society and, as such, they develop and disappear discontinuously and through this disclose the totality of these relations. This structure conveys the message that the market has fully crept into social life, to the degree where one is at once an advertisement and a person. Living under these conditions produces a number of contradictions that constitute the insanity and hypocrisy of living in capitalist society.

Market society then, produces not only fragmented subjects but the complete fragmentation of social life. This fragmentation allows the brutality of capitalism to colonize the human condition. As Cinar laments, we get urinals next to the wonders of human history, cosmetics next to the death tolls in Afghanistan and Iraq, the marketing of vacations alongside brutal exploitation and dictatorship. Cinar reveals the societal response to this through the couples retreat to their own private security boxes, provided to them by the market. In this sense, the complete commodification of social life finds its terminal point of expression in the partitioning of our own social beings from these processes and our own feeble attempts to secure ourselves from them. The consequences MGC aptly shows is the reinforcement of our own alienation from ourselves and from each other, precisely because we all form part of capitalist society. The man, in particular, is a paragon of this reality as he attempts suicide in his own private security box to end his imprisonment from the market only to be distracted by the very processes he revolts against in disgust. His repeated failure to commit suicide is caused by his inability to see that he himself constitutes part of this market society. Cinar in fact lays this theme out quite clearly and succinctly in the opening lines when the woman declares "We are the flowers of the commercial world. We are the vomit of the commercial world". They, like all of us, are at once both of these things, nurtured and cared for as consumers, the subjects of society and at once the objects of it - the refuse, the labourers who are exploited to constitute its existence. The tragedy and insanity is that the couple cannot recognize themselves as the subjects that constitute the processes that transform them into these wretched objects.



This is one of the central messages of MGC. The structure of the play conforms to that of capitalist society insofar as capitalist society cannot be understood through a single narrative. Instead it can only be understood under the fragmentary conditions its relations of exploitation and alienation produce. Superficially this reality appears disjointed, chaotic, and beyond explanation. However, with greater focus we see ourselves as the subjects of capitalist society that constitute these relations. Our imprisonment to the market stems from the fact that we ourselves play a part, much like the man and woman, in the exploitation and alienation that constitute capitalist society. In the end we cannot understand this reality; we have after-all "only applied for cleaner, dish-washer or waiter positions". We don't understand that in these positions we ourselves are both the subject and object of these processes. Cinar's play is a scream to see outlining this insanity. As such, Cinar's play constitutes an important critique of capitalism in Canadian society and warrants engagement by all.

References

Marr, Den. Fully Fringed, June 28th, 2010. www.fullyfringed.ca
Photos by A. Erdem Ozcan.