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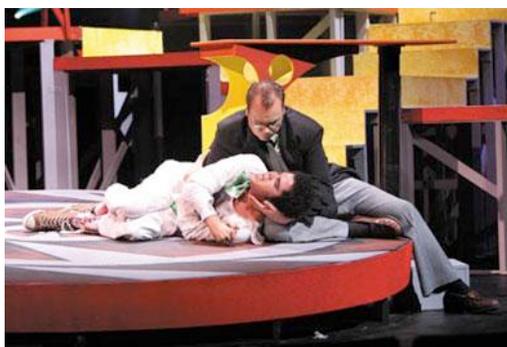
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Palomar's 'Gas' is a Sensurround experience

By: PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer

For Palomar College's production of the George Kaiser play "Gas," director Michael Mufson didn't just stage a play, he created an entire world.



"Gas"

When: 4 p.m. Nov. 29; 8 p.m. Nov. 30 and Dec. 1; 2 p.m. Dec. 2

Where: Howard Brubeck Theatre, Palomar College, 1140 W.

Mission Road, San Marcos

Tickets: \$12, general; \$10, seniors; \$8, students

Info: (760) 744-1150, Ext. 2453

Web: www.palomarperforms.com

From the moment audiences enter the Howard Brubeck Theatre, they're enveloped in a multisensory environment of theater, music, visual projections and sound that transport the viewer to the surreal, expressionistic setting of Kaiser's 1918 play. The combined impact can be, at times, overwhelming, but it's an ambitious and thought-provoking examination of the troubling issues that inspired Kaiser to write the advocacy-oriented drama.

"Gas" is the story of the world's largest gas works, a highly productive factory that supplies fuel to much of the world. But a miscalculation in the fuel formula leads to a devastating explosion that kills thousands of factory workers. The Billionaire's Son who has inherited the plant is so troubled by the human and environmental toll of the explosion that instead of rebuilding, he decides to turn the land into an environmentally friendly green utopia. But he faces fierce opposition from the labor committee, the surviving factory workers and even his own deep-in-debt son-in-law, who chooses suicide over a partnership with his father-in-law in green-topia.

Kaiser wrote the play as Germany struggled to recover from the bleakness and poverty of World War I and the dehumanizing aspects of the Industrial Revolution. He hoped to inspire the literati and industrialists to lift up the masses, so like many expressionist works of the era, the play is filled with long, preachy speeches, flat archetypal characters and a heavy message that ends on a typically pessimistic note.

To make the play accessible to modern audiences, Mufson has trimmed the script by half, modernized some of its text and used a myriad of theatrical techniques ---- video, dance, music and audience-interactive bits and the addition of an optimistic coda ---- to bring the story into the 21st century.

As audience members enter the theater, loud percussive music composed by Mike Dillinger and Eric Meer Bergen

thrums rhythmically while worker-bee cast members pantomime the hurried, repetitive and labor-intensive motions of factory work on Mark Adams' surrealistic multilevel set that looks a bit like one of M.C. Escher's eye-teasing woodcuts. Overhead on video screens, abstract imagery (also designed by Adams) pulses and bubbles toward the ultimate explosion.

The factory noise ---- an industrial soundscape musicalized with keyboards, drum machines and what sounds like a celesta ---- grows increasingly loud as the factory nears its extinction, but unfortunately it drowns out most of the dialogue in the first two scenes and you long for clarity and character development.

When the gas works explodes ---- impressively rendered by sound designer Tony Bushey-Anello, lighting designer Pat Larmer and in Adams' video projections ---- you're grateful for the peace and quiet of the stilled machinery.

The Billionaire's Son, played by Jared Spears, starts out as a plain-vanilla bureaucrat but is gradually engulfed by his regrets and despair.

His humanity stands in sharp contrast to the factory workers, who have morphed over time into Kafka-like automatons. The neurotic clerk, manically played by Jack Ashcraft, is so addicted to his adding machine, his hand has transformed into a large robotic claw. The survivors of the blast twitch uncontrollably, and the families of those killed in the blast describe their late brother, husband and son as so dehumanized, they're identifiable only by the tools of their labor.

To heighten the horror of the explosion, choreographer Kree Fieldsa creates a dance of death for the workers consumed by fire. In the style of Japanese butoh (which pantomimes the gruesomeness that Hiroshima victims suffered after the atomic blast), three burned workers writhe in agony as they shed their factory coveralls, revealing body stockings painted by costumer Linda Hernandez to appear like human anatomical models whose skin has been removed. Mufson has these fire victims (Mikey Conner, Meaghan Gonsieor and Sean LaRocca) continue to haunt the Billionaire's Son for the rest of the play, serving as constant reminder of the blast.

In the play's second act, the workers rise up, demanding justice for the dead. Sprinkled throughout the audience, the workers call up the families of the victims to speak, vow to strike and demand the firing of the Engineer, whose miscalculated formula caused the blast. But the defensive and guilt-plagued Engineer (Ryan Balfour) resigns voluntarily, saying it wasn't human error that caused the disaster but human arrogance that dared to master nature.

While most of the characters in the drama are written as one-dimensional stereotypes, several of the actors deliver especially natural and poignant performances, especially Charmaine Reed as the Mother of a dead worker, Sarah Blackman as a victim's Wife and Patricia Cassedy as a victim's Sister.

The play's first act is the most compelling and action-packed. The second act features the best acting, but it gets bogged down in long speeches as the Billionaire's Son tries unsuccessfully to achieve his vision.

"Gas" runs one hour, 50 minutes, with intermission. Because of its themes, it's not ideally suited for children. But it's an interesting study for high school and college students, who can learn much about German expressionism, theatrical technique and the dangers of gas dependence.