

THE NIGHT HERON

BY JULIET WITTMAN

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Michael Stricker (left) gets his claws in Mare Trevathan in *The Night Heron*.

The setting is a hovel in England's Cambridgeshire fens, a flimsy wood structure that offers only the barest protection from the elements, both natural and human. The protagonists are a pair of gardeners who have lost their jobs at Cambridge University's Christ Church College – Wattmore because of accusations concerning a ten-year-old boy, Griffin because of his loyalty to Wattmore. Griffin is frustrated and confused by his friend, who belongs to a Christian cult led by Dougal, a man Griffin identifies as a moron and who has directed his followers to place iconostases in their homes – panels depicting Christian imagery based on Byzantine tradition. One of these adorns the cabin's back wall. The two men are close, protective of each other against an undefined menace, an evil that presses against their windows and eventually enters in the person of Bolla Fogg, an ex-con or perhaps an escapee, a lumpy, mean-tempered potato of a woman with a very shaky hold on her own sanity.

A night heron has strayed onto the fens, and a hundred pounds is being offered for a photograph. Unfortunately, the men have no camera. Griffin is also interested in a poetry competition sponsored by Cambridge that comes with a 2,000-pound reward. Bolla thinks she can help. She knows something about poetry, having taken a poetry class in prison. (An assiduous student, Bolla also remembers every word of an anatomy class that revealed the exact location of all major arteries.) When her efforts at composition stall, she comes up with a novel and illegal solution.

A lot of England's hot young playwrights trade in mindless violence, and Jez Butterworth is no exception, as he demonstrated in his first play, *Moro*, which was staged by Paragon Theatre a few

years back. There's an essential difference between that play and this one, though: *The Night Heron* contains some overt violence, but for the most part what we get is memories and intimations of violence. Wattmore is hated by the villagers for his supposed actions toward the boy; in addition, the boy's father is a vicious man who once poisoned a litter of puppies because their owner reneged on a deal with him. As the play opens, Wattmore has already been beaten up, and a low, angry sense of danger thrums beneath the action. We learn that, for all his chatty affability, Griffin is a dangerous man. As for Bolla, heaven knows why she was in prison. "If you could read the mind of the average gypsy," Griffin says, in a classic moment of displacement, "you'd never leave the house." Of course, it isn't the gypsies who pose a threat.

The Night Heron also differs from *Mojo* in the characters' almost universal longing for grace; on one level, the entire play represents a struggle between good and evil. The English are passionate gardeners, and Wattmore is no exception. His taped soliloquies on mulching, flower beds, annuals and perennials evoke a peaceful, nurturant world, reminding us that gardens bring the wild and the cultivated together in harmony. In a sudden and surprising sequence, Bolla recites Andrew Marvell's tribute to his garden, which he sees as an earthly facsimile of the original garden: Paradise.

Christian imagery is all over. I don't think Butterworth would like it stated this baldly, but the night heron – forever beyond the men's mucky, sad world, sought after and elusive – strikes me as a symbol of Christ as clear as the Ancient Mariner's albatross. There's a kind of resurrection, too, in the form of a young, naked boy. Actually, he rises three times, and his second appearance, quoting Shelley, stops a lynch mob in its tracks. "If we become best friends, that's when I'll die for you," Bolla tells the men, but when the sacrificial death does come, it isn't hers.

All this poetry, horticulture and religious iconography could be the sign of a writer trying to bring meaning and coherence to confused action, to a plot we in the audience can never quite grasp. But that isn't the case: The metaphysics are core-deep, and *The Night Heron* is firmly grounded in character and place. Wattmore and Griffin, with their hunger and fear, their odd, enduring friendship, their diet of beans and captured rabbits, are very real; the dialogue is engrossing and often outrageously funny. Even if you can't comprehend the whole, scene by scene it's entirely comprehensible.

The performances are thick with meaning and conviction. Warren Sherrill brings his talent for charged understatement to the role of befuddled, underwater Wattmore, and Michael Stricker is funny and desperate as Griffin. Mare Trevathan makes Bolla's splintered and unmoored personality her own, though this is a character you watch in amazement rather than with empathy. There's also a good comic performance by Jarrad Holbrook, and Josh Hartwell is appropriately slimy as Dougal. The accent of the fens is hard even for English people to understand, so director Wendy Franz has opted for a vaguely Cockney dialect. Sherrill and Stricker do well with it, but I found Trevathan's throat-clogging version a little distracting. David Lafont's set, Brian Freeland's sound and Jacob M. Welch's lighting are all first-rate.

The tension between the characters' corrupt lives and their yearning for poetry reminds me of Charles Dickens's defense of his portrayal of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*: "It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth. He leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts; the hope yet lingering there; the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the weed-choked well. It involved the best and worst shades of our nature; much of its ugliest hues, and something of its most beautiful; it is a

worst shades of our nature, much of its ugliest hues, and something of its most beautiful, it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility; but it is a truth."

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