

'A Man Like You' at Red Soil Productions: Humanist Political Theatre at its Finest

Thomas Burns Scully - *Onstage New York Critic* – July 2016

New York, NY - As a child who grew up in the Middle-East, my perspective on the world is different from your typical twenty-something. I won't say better or more rounded, because there's no way of quantifying these things, but it's different, make no mistake. When the headlines are filled with talk of what Muslims are like, what terrorists represent, what extremism means, and how it is birthed... I can't help but think to my time growing up in Oman and reflecting on how unsubtle the picture is. The shocking truth that travel and experience of other cultures teaches you is that people are just people.

Every society has its saints and bullies, its unfortunates and its fortunates, its lovers and its fighters, its philosophers and its shallow frat boys. Humanization of your enemy is the best prescription anyone can hope for, not because it teaches you that all people are good people, but because it teaches you all people are people. Not some archetype or headline... just a cluster of cells, blood and neuroses. 'A Man Like You' is a play that understands that, and Red Soil Productions' presentation of this play by Silvia Cassini is as eye-opening, moving, and dark, as you can expect it to be. It understands the subtlety of existence and dares to humanize extremists non-tokenistically. For that it should be praised. And so I will, for the next few hundred words or so.



'A Man Like You' follows the kidnapping of Patrick North (Matthew Stannah), a British man working in International Relations in Somalia. He is kidnapped by a terrorist group and imprisoned by the sinister Abdi (Jeffrey Marc) and the brutal Hussan (Andrew Clarke). As days turn in to months, he has long and thought-provoking conversations with Abdi about the nature of extremism, the trappings of their various societies, and the parallels between them as people. All the while, we cut back to the North's house in Nairobi, where North's wife Elizabeth (Jenny Boote) is dealing with her husband's absence, and coming to terms with the reality that he may

never be returned to her. The whole affair is gritty, honest and unsensational in the best possible way.

Make no mistake, this play is not torture-porn, a plastic manufactured white-guilt play, or a melodramatic Grand-Guignol. So often these are the traps with these works, to make a thing brutal and violent with no regard for reality. But, while it is far from cozy and loving, 'A Man Like You' avoids all these pitfalls. Cassini's writing and Yudelka Heyer's direction instead speak extensively to cultural misunderstanding, and the parallels of entrapment between privileged and unprivileged cultures. Neither Abdi, nor North is outright villainized or deified, they are instead presented as two individuals, two people who under the circumstances presented to them, became the creatures that they are. Their interactions and understandings within misunderstandings, and vice versa, have to be seen to be fully understood. Suffice to say, the play speaks to honest, common humanity, without painting over either side's atrocities. Stannah and Marc's performances here make the play, one can make no bones about that. They are the meat and potatoes, the ham and eggs, the black bean and chipotle mayo of this show. They are uniquely engaging, unabashedly brave, devoid of pussyfooting, and raucously uncynical, all at the same time. Put shortly, you believe they are the individuals they are pretending to be. These feel like real people having a real conversation under real duress. Also excellent is Jenny Boote as Elizabeth. While one could argue that her role in the play is unnecessary (I would not argue this position very hard, but a more cynical person than me might) she makes her role integral with an emotional performance that pulls no punches. She also never falls in to the trap of being a one-note crying-machine. Boote finds a seemingly infinite variety of ways to play scenes of torturous heartbreak, allowing each one to feel unique, and a logical evolution of the last. The only real disappointment of the play, so far as I can see, is that Andrew Clarke is underutilized. Yes, he is menacing and devilishly violent as Hassan; he plays the role fully and utterly convincingly, but it would be nice to have a human moment with him at some point. Abdi has so many, Hussan could have had one good joke to flesh him out. Anyone who has seen his work knows that Clarke is capable of such feats.

That said, this is a minor inconvenience to the viewer, and, as I have amply and unabashedly outlined above, I enjoyed this play greatly. Humanist political theatre at its finest. The production feels rich, characterful, mucky and hurtful in a real and thoroughly stimulating way. I recommend it to all theatre-goers over the age of fifteen. Younger than that may be pushing it, given the themes explored. Red Soil have done a wonderful thing here. This is probably their most grown-up and groundbreaking show to date. Not that their work was juvenile before, but this particular showing feels like they have found a new depth that their company can explore. It will be thrilling to see what comes next. In the mean time, go and see 'A Man Like You', it is excellent.

'A Man Like You' plays at the Iati Theatre at 64 E4th St. until July 31st. It is written by Silvia Cassini, directed by Yudelka Heyer and presented by Red Soil Productions. For tickets see redsoilproductions.com. Shows typically start at 8pm and tickets begin at \$35.

This review was written by Thomas Burns Scully, a New York based writer, actor and musician. His work has been lauded by Time Out NY, the New York Times, BAFTA US, the Abbey Theatre Dublin and other smaller organizations too numerous to mention. His theatrical writing has been performed on three continents. He performs improv. comedy professionally and plays lead guitar in two bands. He is generally considered to be the thrifty person's Renaissance man. Follow him on Facebook (as Thomas Burns Scully), and on Twitter (@ThomasDBS)