

A haunting look into humanity's dark corners

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Scorched

By Wajdi Mouawad

Translated by Linda Gaboriau

Directed by Richard Rose

Print Edition - Section Front

Starring Sergio Di Zio

and Sophie Goulet

At Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. Touring to Montreal, Winnipeg and Edmonton

Rating: ****

Scorched, Linda Gaboriau's deft English translation of Lebanese-Québécois playwright Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies*, is back at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. From there, director Richard Rose's Dora-winning production embarks on a tour to Montreal's Centaur Theatre, Winnipeg's Manitoba Theatre Centre and Edmonton's Citadel Theatre.

If the gods were just, this heart-wrenching wonder would then tour on forever. This is a Canadian classic-in-waiting that stares into humanity's darkest corners and doesn't flinch or succumb to despair. It is an artful, humanist anti-polemic about the vicious circle of violence.

Scorched begins in peaceful, somnambulistic Montreal, where twins Simon and Janine are summoned to the office of notary Alphonse Lebel.

After not speaking a word for five years, their little-loved mother Nawal has died, uttering only this final coda of speech: "There is nothing more beautiful than being together."

At the will reading, Simon and Janine receive their inheritances and some unorthodox instructions. Before they can engrave Nawal's name on her headstone, Simon must deliver a sealed envelope to their brother, while Janine must deliver another to their father. This is more complicated than buying postage: Neither twin knew they had a brother, and both believed their father had died a hero in their mother's country of birth.

The bequeathed quest takes first Janine and then Simon to that unnamed, war-torn homeland. As the siblings search for answers in the rubble, Nawal's life story unfolds in front of us with three actors playing her at different ages (a nod perhaps to fellow Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay's *Albertine, en cinq temps*). Janick Hébert's Nawal is young, curious and too passionate for her own good; Sarah Orenstein's is war-wearied and middle-aged; and Nicola Lipman's is a hard, chiselled survivor. (Orenstein, a new addition to this remount, has yet to fully find her feet.)

Neither of Nawal's children are well-equipped for this journey. Simon, a delicate Sergio Di Zio, is a boxer, but he has more bark than fight and, in a metaphor for the sheltered West, trouble with his peripheral vision. Janine, played as a tight bundle of repressed rage by Sophie Goulet, is a mathematician who retreats into silences like her mother (and, sometimes, listening to tapes recorded at Nawal's bedside, into her mother's actual silences).

Despite having bangs like Feist, Janine's repeated chorus isn't 1, 2, 3, 4, but $1 + 1 = 2$. In the course of the play, however, she learns that sometimes one and one make one. This may be oblique, but to reveal any more is to spoil Mouawad's brilliantly constructed mystery.

Scorched is full of unexpected reversals: Romances turn out to be horror stories, and horror stories turn out to be romances. In fact, Mouawad argues that every story is both - it just depends where you start and stop telling it.

He also employs humour subversively, wielding it like the double-edged sword it is.

Since Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, a play this one alludes to, playwrights have been telling us that an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. But I've rarely seen the cycle of revenge depicted as complexly or compassionately as it is here.

Rose brings the play's themes out with creative visuals. He has his actors sprint around Graeme Thomson's sand-covered set, creating a well-worn circular path around the fringes that is a physical embodiment of the country's never-ending spiral of violence.

In one moving scene, actor Jerry Franken, playing one of the drama's many well-articulated victim-perpetrators, mops the sand as he tells his part of the story. A militia man turned school caretaker, he makes and unmakes little swirls with the mop, continually trying to wipe away his mark, only to make another one in its place. It's the message of the play shrunk down to a miniature motion.

There are moments in *Scorched* that one could quibble with. The trendy math metaphors (think David Auburn's *Proof* or John Mighton's oeuvre) seem particularly tortured in translations; try as you might, it's hard to not to grit your teeth at Janine's paeans to polygons.

But having watched other talented translators trip over Mouawad's concrete abstractions

and rational poetry, the strengths of Gaboriau's translation are all the more apparent - especially her ingenious ways of handling the wordplay and multiple languages.

In the end, I'm willing to bury my head in the sand about the production's smattering of shortcomings, because this haunting work may be the best piece of theatre this

country has produced this

millennium.

Scorched continues at the

Tarragon Theatre until Sept. 28 (<http://www.tarragontheatre.com>).