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## Chaos engulfs world, and you'll feel the fear in 'Far Away'

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### THEATER REVIEW

"Far Away"

\$20-\$25. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sundays. Also 2 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. Thursday and 6 p.m. Wednesday and Nov. 16. Through Nov. 20. 7 Stages, 1105 Euclid Ave. N.E., Little Five Points. 404-523-7647, [www.7stages.org](http://www.7stages.org).

The verdict: Chilling.

The butterflies have gone bazonkers. The rats are bleeding out of their mouths and ears. The mallards are committing rape, and they are on the side of the elephants. The deer are with us.

This is how the characters speak in the final scenes of Caryl Churchill's mondo-bizarro play, "Far Away," about a time when all evidence of civilized behavior -- logic and language and the quiet, sacred order of things -- is nearing extinction. A surreal political treatise in which the form of the play collapses to mimic the breakdown of society, "Far Away" describes a situation of war that's not as far-fetched and futuristic as the title may imply.

It takes less than an hour for this strange and disturbing show to do its task. More experimental and harder to elucidate than "A Number," the other full production in the 7 Stages festival devoted to the work of this important British playwright, "Far Away" won't wrap you in a cocoon of happiness and hope. But it is likely to leave you grasping for explanations about the writer's apocalyptic vision and her intimations that the human soul is being slowly obliterated.

Not that there are any easy answers.

The story of Joan (Maia Knispel), her aunt Harper (Joanna Daniel) and her co-worker Todd (Johnell Easter) is as baffling to me as the next person. But it's a puzzlement that director **Melissa Foulger** and her company deliver with keenness, integrity and visual panache.

As the tale opens, we know something is wrong from the look on the face of young Joan, who seems to be hanging on a precipice of fear and horror. As her aunt knits and tries to maintain a scene of domestic normalcy, we realize that the girl's foot is smeared with blood. What exactly did she see her uncle doing in the backyard? And what is the connection between that mysterious event and the horror and chaos that follow?

In the next scene, Joan has gotten employment at a hat factory, where she meets Todd. But just wait until you realize what their elaborately crafted chapeaus are being used for. I don't want to give the surprise away, but this show's hat parade, choreographed to jolting electronic music and peppered by jarring searchlights, has much more in common with Auschwitz than Regina Taylor's "Crowns."

By the end of the story, the characters are speaking in absurd, abstruse gobbledygook loaded with symbol and allegory. The paranoia and portentousness of George Orwell's "1984" and "Animal Farm" spring to mind, as does the spooky, sci-fi allure of films like "Blade Runner" and "Gattaca." As the three characters hunker down in Harper's home, the whole animal kingdom wages war. (Hence the talk of cats and crocodiles, Koreans and Bolivians.)

Katya Lanevskaia's sets recall Magritte's cloudscapes and evaporated human silhouettes. (Lanevskaia also created the hats and costumes.) Erik Satie's haunting piano "Gymnopedies" are played throughout the chaotic final scene, a melancholy counterpoint to the onslaught of verbal nonsense.

Five years into a new millennium, we find ourselves besieged by war, terrorism, natural disasters and shortages -- images that are eerily reflected in Churchill's world.

Watching "Far Away" is ultimately akin to seeing the Earth self-destruct on a sunny, crystalline day. The images are poetic and hallucinogenic, but the consequences are real and lethal. Let's hope "Far Away" isn't too close.

Photo

HEIDI HOWARD / 7 Stages

Harper (Joanna Daniel, right) tries to convince her niece Joan (Maia Knispel) that she's imagining the horrors keeping her awake at night in "Far Away," by British playwright Caryl Churchill.

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