

Murder is Child's Play
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Friday, 01 October 2010 11:41

Last weekend I took in two shows, both appearing through the auspices of the Yale Repertory Theatre: one is a musical adaptation of Shirley Jackson's modern Gothic novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Adam Bock and Todd Almond, playing till Oct. 9th at the University Theater, the other was a three-night stand of *The Case of the Spectator*, created and performed by María Jerez, at the Iseman Theater, as part of the No Boundaries series through the World Performance Project at Yale. What did the two have in common? A comic approach to murder.

In *Castle*, the murders happened in the past, six years ago, and were committed by a child. The ramifications of childish murder aren't engaged with in any moral way, of course, because the piece more or less condones the wayward child's point of view. Did those people (her mother, father, aunt and younger brother) deserve to die? Well, hardly, but they really aren't alive in the play, but for one scene – the dinner at which they eat arsenic-laced sugar and buy the farm – and that scene is comical, maybe in the way that only impending death through dessert can be.

In *Spectator*, it's not so simple. Murder is the *raison d'être* of the piece, a one-woman performance of numerous murders, most involving the death of a woman, but not all. Each murder is filtered through several lenses, literally in the sense that a small digital camera is commanding our view, relaying artfully manipulated images on a flatscreen TV, but also in the sense that the figure seated in an armchair with her back to us is reading a series of murder mysteries. Also, not so much filter as frame, there's the larger context of the stage space with its props, which reminded me a bit of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* with its collection of dolls and toys and its distinct areas. In her playhouse Jerez wasn't a hostess so much as the kind of kid who asks you over to watch her play with her toys, with each murder inviting a marveling enjoyment at how the grisly act will be choreographed, suggested by images on that screen rather than staged as actions.

When a child murders her doll, do we have to take it as an act of aggression aimed at someone real? Or is she killing something the doll stands for, an image of woman, perhaps, or is she simply imitating, and having fun with, the conventions of a very successful genre, the murder mystery in both its pulp and film versions? If you answer "all of the above" then you would've seen the play I saw, for all those elements and more felt implicated at various times. And, as is often the case when watching something that offers plenty of repetition with a difference, one starts to contemplate what watching these cleverly executed killings means.

And that's about when Jerez turned the gun on "the spectator."

(For my review of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, go to: <http://newhavenreview.com/index.php/2010/09/30/home-sweet-gloom/>)