

Play and set reflect shifting sands PERSONAL, POLITICAL TUMULT DRIVE THRILLER

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Rivulets of rain snake down the window pane artfully framing the stage in "Tranced." The water trickles throughout the play, sometimes catching the light or splashing against the glass, always registering deep in the subconscious.

Kris Stone's hypnotic set design subtly lures theater-goers into a state of contemplation, visually conveying the themes in Robert Clyman's psychological thriller. Surfaces shift and appearances alter as seamlessly as the weather in this often mesmerizing drama at San Jose Rep about a psychiatrist uncovering hidden memories in the minds of patients.



Azmera (Kenya Brome) believes she has been cured as Philip (Thom Rivera)... (Pat Kirk / San Jose Rep)

Director Barbara Damashek's smart production reinforces the most beguiling aspect of the play, the clarity of its insights into the workings of the intellect, and masks the places where the text overreaches itself.

The playwright potently links an individual's repression of a disturbing memory to the way the whole world ignores and denies atrocities. Clyman stresses that our desperate need to overlook the suffering of the less fortunate may help us cling to the belief that our world is civilized. He pries open the repressed collective memory with a delicacy practiced during years as a clinical psychiatrist.

He also nails the mind games played in therapy sessions, where Philip (Thom Rivera) induces trances in his patients to seduce the mind into revealing its secrets. Rivera makes real the ploys and gambits used by the good doctor on the unwilling Azmera (Kenya Brome), an arrogant graduate student from Africa. She has come to him because panic attacks prevent her from studying, but byzantine walls of defense stand in the doctor's way. Gradually, he pokes around in her psyche like a spy with access to a hard disc, as Azmera slowly recovers the memory of a tragic event in a remote African village.

Stone's sleek, postmodern design connects the doctor's office to another space where an intrepid reporter named Beth (Stacy Ross) claws for information about a possible African genocide no one has noticed, because so little attention is paid to the continent. She storms into the office of the macho government honcho Logan (a sublime James Carpenter) to demand the truth. Reporter and politician circle one another like tigers, their actions rife with ego, ambition and flirtation.

Clyman's observations on class and race are tantalizing. His dialogue crackles with subtext and wit. But his characters seem schematically drawn, lacking detailed back stories. Perhaps that's the point - that people are fundamentally unknowable. But his script places a tremendous burden on the actors to make us care about people we don't really understand.

In Act 1, the element of suspense about what will happen next in this sexy potboiler carries us through. But in act two, Clyman weighs down the narrative with too much analytical baggage.

Still, the play's ever-changing landscape reflects the constant shifts in the world's balance of power and gives the drama real traction. Clyman's take on the inequalities between men and women, the First and Third Worlds and the privileged and poor casts a spell that lingers long after the last line of dialogue.

'Tranced'
By Robert Clyman

The upshot: A mesmerizing staging of a new psychological thriller about the politics of power at home and abroad.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon Wednesdays, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Through: Feb. 24

Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes; one intermission

Tickets: \$15-\$59; (408) 367-7255, www.sjrep.org

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