

BACKSTAGE WEST

Critic's Pick

Focus Today

Reviewed By Paul Birchall



This latest play by the endlessly creative Burglars of Hamm starts out as a simple spoof of those self-help seminars that you are sent to over the weekend when your boss is a dimwit. But, from this easily identifiable point of satire, the work gradually unspools into a harrowing portrait of greed, manipulation, and hatred. A trio of horrifyingly perky facilitators romps around the stage, getting us into the corporate "groove," as cliched and meaningless slogans like "teamwork, effort, and commitment" are splashed over a Power Point screen. We in the audience are forced to fill out "workbooks" and give ourselves points on pop quizzes about business strategy, as the performers act out hilariously lame "motivational sketches" that urge us to "expand our horizons" and "do it now." The atmosphere created by the three facilitators is almost unnervingly realistic. Indeed it's so authentically depicted, you'll start to feel that you're back at your last corporate job.

But, if this were a straight-up spoof of business seminars, our interest would wane early. Before too long, we start to get the gist of where the bubbly, genial antics are leading us--and the work unfolds into a surprisingly disturbing meditation on powerlessness and propaganda, with a grim underlying true purpose. The performances crackle with irony and scathing wit, the three "facilitators" almost chillingly effective. Director Matt Almos' staging is rich with ironic undercurrents; he does a fine job of hinting at the characters' psychotic natures and of the fact that even they know their message is a cover that's more about the crushing of the human will than about motivating and offering pep. Albert Dayan's manically happy facilitator, eyes a-flashing, desperately cajoling, demonstrates the creepy hysteria of a cultist. Jon Beauregard portrays an affable fellow whose burly bonhomie only occasionally offers glimpses of the cruelty you might see in an American jailhouse guard in Iraq. Selina Woolery Smith's Rebecca at first seems calm but then unexpectedly explodes with a raw maliciousness that's decidedly unnerving. This is a lively and indeed unexpectedly unnerving production. (Alternating cast.)