

Grave Yard Stick

By Sandra Alland at Xtra!

“A is for Amy who fell down the stairs.” Thus begins Edward Gorey’s illustrated poem, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, a macabre rhyme that details the death of one child for each letter of the alphabet. Newly formed theatre company The Thistle Project has turned this short poem into a delightful 80-minute romp in the graveyard of life, *Gorey Story*.

After Matthew Romantini and Christine Horne adapted Gorey’s text for the stage, they collaborated with director Erika Batdorf and five other performers to create vignettes around the events leading up to each child’s demise. The ensemble added the character of Death itself, based on Gorey’s cover drawing, a skull-faced figure dressed in black coattails and top hat with a black umbrella and Darth Vader breathing. They also imagine the figures absent from Gorey’s work: parents.

The ensemble of Horne, Romantini, Cole J. Alvis, Whitney Barris, Tania McCartney, Ginette Mohr and Nathan Younger is a pleasure to watch – no one steals the show, everyone pulls her weight and, at times, they even breathe as one.

One aim of The Thistle Project is to integrate movement into theatre and this group of young performers does so skillfully and without too much preciousness. Romantini’s choreography considers the abilities of each performer, so no one looks like they’re struggling. A tango with Death is particularly sharp.

Artists’ Play Studio is a difficult space with pillars, reflective white curtains and walls, church pews instead of chairs and limited technical capabilities. But Batdorf has risen to the challenge. She presents *Gorey Story* on a promenade stage, eliminating most of the poor sightlines and creating a flexible playing space.

Batdorf and set designer Laura Gardner playfully embrace the white of the room, adding a white floor with hand-drawn black shading. Gardner complements the floor with a single white bench and a platform with two sets of stairs. Set into the front of the platform is a black screen with consecutive white-lettered projections of lines from Gorey’s poem. The set functions well, but combined with white costumes designed by Ming Wong, it feels too bright for the play’s shadowy subject matter.

The script is funny and compelling with some vignettes clever or gory enough to make the audience squeal. Winnie getting “embedded in ice” and Maud being “swept out to sea” are particularly jarring and eerie. The company also makes inventive use of the screen by turning the vignette for the letter “T” into a funny silent film, complete with dialogue cards and atmospheric piano.

Gorey Story avoids becoming structurally monotonous by having certain characters – parents, siblings, servants – reappear in ingenious ways. The company physically inverts several scenes so we get to witness the offstage action of a death we’ve already seen, adding layers of meaning and humour.

Perhaps the only problem with the script is its slightly heavy-handed focus on bad parenting; there are too many episodes with the same punch line. Gorey's book is often funny precisely because it doesn't speculate on anything beyond the moment of death. The Thistle Project's ideas about the moments before are intriguing, but they could use less moralizing.

Overall, the pacing is excellent, but once in a while the action drags, blatantly asking us to understand or feel something. The company is good and should trust its audience and itself more.

Tom Kerr's stunning sound design includes effects and percussion made onstage by the company – they become a whispery drain and a voiling sea – and witty musical numbers like “Do You Know Where Your Children Are Tonight” and “Embalm.” There is just the right amount of music to add variety and texture without everything derailing into schmaltzy musical theatre. The live piano accompaniment is wonderfully whimsical and suspenseful.

The Thistle Project is a company to watch. They find exciting ways to make non-theatrical material engaging and provocative for a live audience. Gorey Story captures the absurdity of The Gashlycrumb Tinies – and of death itself. A perfect antidote to the November blahs.