

Review: Sexual tension crackles in 'Bernarda Alba'

By CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS — "The House of Bernarda Alba" holds tight the spinster women of Andalusia as if they were locked in a vault. Twenty ladies wander in, out and around the stage. Of menfolk there are none. There's a stallion in the courtyard, but he can't reach the mares. The air seethes with repressed desire.

"Bernarda Alba" traces the effect of men upon women by the deliberate exclusion of men from the play. Matriarch Bernarda Alba keeps her five unmarried daughters (ages 39, 30, 27, 24 and 20) locked away from prying eyes and completely under her thumb. Pepe el Romano - the local lothario - courts Angustias but visits Adela's window at night. Martirio has secrets, Maria Josefa thinks she gave birth to a lamb and wise servant Poncia sees all, knows all and once killed her husband's pet birds.

Federico Garcia Lorca wrote the play in 1936, two months before his assassination at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Themes of repression, passion and conformity are a subtle look forward at the fascist regime of Francisco Franco, the dictator who ruled Spain for almost 40 years.

Director Annette Trossbach opts for an in-the-round experience, creating a vivid piece of theater that showcases the work's emotions and yanks the audience into the action. Dozens of crosses fashioned from sticks and twigs hang above the stage - a simple platform with seven wooden seats and a chest that doubles as a table. The vibe reads as pagan sacrifice - fitting because Bernarda Alba squeezes the life out of any emotion that dares wander within her grasp. Actions in the play bear out that theme.

Louise Wigglesworth clutches a black enamel cane in one hand and role of Bernarda Alba in the other. A merciless tyrant, she towers even as she hobbles, stooped and with crooked feet laced into high black shoes, across the floor. "I've got five chains - for each of you, and these walls that my father built so that not even the weeds would know my desolation." She could beat five daughters and their emotions into submission without breaking a sweat.

Nykkie Rizley Ptaszek brings a madwoman's gleam to middle daughter Martirio's eye. A menacing pas de deux with bubbly Ashley Graziano (Adela) offers the audience a glimpse of the character's evil, while a second moonlit ramble around the stage with aged Maria Josefa (the delightful Patricia Clopton, who even chirps out a song) shows

a softer side. Joann Haley has steel as wiser-than-thou servant Poncia - she delivers her lines with a knowing smirk. Rose Jung brings a comic touch to a complaining maid.

The sprawling cast and in-the-round staging has its challenges. Several actresses get lost within the mourning shawl maelstrom; the dialogue sometimes lacks the bitter edge you might expect from repressed virgin maids shut away from the world. Garcia Lorca draws his characters with a sharp knife - that doesn't always come through. Bear in mind that line-of-sight for each audience member is different, so you may get a completely different show and experience the same actress in a totally new way.

Trossbach and her cast tunnel through layers of symbolism to arrive at the dark tragedy at the heart of Lorca's work and its condemnation of tradition, prejudice and authoritarianism. The play screams for heart and mind to be free and unbound. Steven Pawlowski's sound design adds a layer of realism. Look for Wigglesworth and Bernada's tap, tap, tapping cane - and be very afraid.

"The House of Bernarda Alba" or "The House of Marcus Lycus?" E-mail me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).



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