

Los Angeles Times

# CALIFORNIA

Friday, January 19, 2007

THEATER

## THEATER REVIEW

# Deaf West enhances the search for identity

By CHARLOTTE STODDT  
*Special to The Times*

Back in 1960, two one-acts, Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape" and Edward Albee's "The Zoo Story," played together in Greenwich Village. Both became classics, minimalist blueprints for modern theater. They're double-billed again at Deaf West as "Contemporary Classics: A Night of One Acts" in not so much a revival as a re-imagining.

Beckett and Albee both mine the gap between talk and deeper feeling, so Deaf West's technique of putting speaking and signing actors together onstage amps up the identity crisis at the heart of both plays.

"Tape," Beckett's dourly romantic meditation in which an old man reviews the diary-like recordings he made 30 years earlier, works here like a kind of existential YouTube. His image projected on an upstage screen, the 39-year-old Krapp (the fluidly signing Troy Kotsur, voiced by Greg Bryan) is limber with possibility and lust.

Shuffling in front of us three decades later, Krapp's supposed to be a broken man, but artificially aged Kotsur communicates a vitality at odds with the text's ragged heartbreak. Director Jevon Whetter's ham-fisted approach to the play's physical comedy diminishes the power of this innovative staging.

We enter a strikingly different world with "Zoo Story." Karyl Newman's elegant set, littered with fallen leaves and edged by photo blowups of Central Park, frames a brief encounter between down-and-out Jerry (Tyronne Giordano, voiced by Jeff Alan-Lee) and Peter (Kotsur, voiced by Bryan), a tweedy stiff in publishing. First a curiosity, then a pest and finally a genuine threat. Jerry wants something

from Peter, and he's not leaving until he gets it.

Under Coy Middlebrook's direction, Albee's lacerating insights retain their delicious sting; the story of Jerry and the dog, the play's central monologue, is one of modern drama's great arias. Here, though, it carries a doubly gripping suspense through the device of using speech and sign simultaneously (Linda Bove is the show's American Sign Language master).

Like a welterweight boxer in the fight of his life, Giordano dances around the scene and Peter's diffidence, eyes a gleam, daring the other man to admit to his buried aggression and need. Meanwhile, Jerry's "voice," a still and stricken Alan-Lee, watches his physical, desperately signing self break down.

The space between the two actors is where the audience's imagination finds itself, and it's a pure theater rush. If the play's convulsive climax feels a bit of a stretch, no matter, Giordano and Alan-Lee's Jerry has found his hold on Peter, and on us.

## 'Contemporary Classics: A Night of One Acts'

Where: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

When: 3 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 2 and 3 p.m. Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays


Ends: Feb. 18

Price: \$20 to \$22

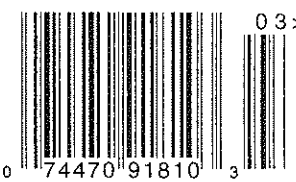
Contact: (818) 762-2773 or (818) 508-8389 (TTY)

Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes

# BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE **west** 1,000+ Jobs 

advertisement



0 74470 91810 3

Trade Publication  
**\$2.75** (California)

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS: KRAPP'S LAST TAPE and THE ZOO STORY

at Deaf West Theatre

Deaf West has a history of bringing great theatre to deaf audiences, and hearing ones, using a combination of deaf and hearing actors. Again the company has selected challenging works and produced them at the highest quality.

**CRITIC'S PICK**

Under the pristine but effective direction of Jevon Whetter, Troy Kotsur is mesmerizing in *Krapp's Last Tape*, a piece often rendered lethal in performance thanks to Samuel Beckett's compelling but merciless drone of disenchantment with the human condition. This monologue be saved from drowning in its own weebegone and cynical rhetoric only by an exceptional actor and inspired staging; here it's realized with entrancing results. Kotsur, who is deaf and who works in American Sign Language, brings a grandiose and decidedly risky Buster Keaton-like quality to the role, while the equally committed Greg Bryan gives voice to the character's ravings. The spooling of the infamous "Tape 5 from Box 3" takes on curious new life as a video projected behind Krapp; as he watches himself 30 years younger, the world-weary disillusionment of old age forms a poignant counterpart to his own youthful enthusiasm captured on VHS tape.

This fresh and fascinating approach to familiar material is even more pronounced with Edward Albee's early *The Zoo Story*: Director Coy Middlebrook has craftily chosen to play it out on two adjacent Central Park benches, where scary stranger-from-hell Jerry (a dynamic and highly physical turn by Tyrone Giordano, also deaf and working in ASL) and quietly respectable businessman Peter (Kotsur, here equally commendable for his subtlety as he is for his intentionally overplayed Krapp) interpret one of the most beguiling and often unnerving two-character encounters in contemporary theatre. On the other, less-prominent bench sit hearing and speaking actors Bryan and Jeff Alan-Lee, who ace the challenging task of playing alternately amused and terrified bystanders while still finding the perfect emotional tone to voice the dialogue of Peter and Jerry for audience members who don't know ASL.

This production instantly shows that mid-century avant-garde theatre and Deaf West belong together, as the heightened physicality of the actors and the heightened theatricality of the plays prove a splendid match.

Presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5114 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Thu.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 & 8 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Jan. 12-Feb. 18. (818) 272-2773. voice; (818) 508-8388, TTY: www.deaf-west.org.

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

# Daily News

dailynews.com

© 2007, Los Angeles Daily News FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 2007

## REVIEW

### Actor is one to watch in these one-act plays

#### A NIGHT OF ONE ACTS ★★★

**Where:** Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, through Feb. 18.

**Tickets:** \$20 to \$22. (818) 272-2773, (818) 508-8389 or visit [www.deafwest.org](http://www.deafwest.org).

**In a nutshell:** They're anything but cheery, and they strike home.

If Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee and Deaf West Theatre's ever-arresting fusion of spoken text and sign language aren't enough to get viewers through the doors at 5112 Lankershim, I offer a couple of other enticements.

They are: Troy Kotsur's work in "Krapp's Last Tape" followed by Troy Kotsur's work in "The Zoo Story." An already masterful — if hugely bleak — pairing of important contemporary drama is adrenalized by two Kotsur performances so frighteningly true that even with the words being supplied by another actor, you connect inextricably with the man's plight. Both, after all, are ours.

As Krapp, the 70-year-old Beckett reprobate endlessly watching videos of his younger self, Kotsur is a portrait of discontented isolation. His clothes are disheveled, his hair wild and gray. When he finally fits the correct key to the correct cabinet to unearth a banana or locates the storage box with the desired tape, Kotsur's Krapp finally reaches a plateau. Finally, the character's tiny world has a certain order.

It's a lonely and contemplative performance wherein an often stationary Krapp does nothing but listen — occasionally reacting — to the dreams of Krapp at 39. In altering the text so that Krapp is watching film rather than listening to a recording, director Jevon Whetter loses nothing of the work's poignancy. In fact, by allowing us to see a younger Kotsur (Greg Bryan supplies both voices), the effect is to give us two performances in one ... not that Krapp is much for change.

The contrast between Krapp and the ineffectual publisher, Peter, in "The Zoo Story" is striking. Albee's play is usually driven by whoever tackles Jerry, the gay boarding-house lodger looking to find some connection — any connection — between man and man or between man and beast. And indeed, it's refreshing to see Tyrone Giordano (Huck Finn in Deaf West's version of "Big River") bearded, wounded, on the prowl and every bit an adult.

Giordano's is the showier work; the man is a gesticulating, contorting bundle

of manias, even baying when the whim hits him (Jeff Alan-Lee otherwise supplies Jerry's voice). But, again, it's Kotsur's Peter who anchors the piece; Kotsur, whose character has to sit transfixed on that bench as this Central Park lunacy unfolds around him. And it's Kotsur's character who is goaded into the play's final shocking act.

Back in the company's NoHo performing space for the first time in more than a year, Deaf West has scrimped on production values.

Krapp's claustrophobic little room — complete with all the outdated technology a man like Krapp would own — is rendered with spare exactitude by set and costume designer Karyl Newman.

After intermission, Krapp's digs disappear and the space is opened up via a beautiful array of Central Park photographs by Stephen Charles Nicholson. Newman strews the ground with fallen leaves.

Coupled with the central performance, that's elegance all around.

— E.H.



Ticket Holders  
by Travis Michael Holder

### **Contemporary Classics: Krapp's Last Tape and The Zoo Story** *Deaf West Theatre*

From *Medea* to *Equus* to *Orphans* to *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the first bigtime musical extravaganzas ever performed by a hearing-impaired company, each time Deaf West announces a new project, it's difficult not to wonder if they've finally bitten off more than they can chew this time 'round.

This is again an understandable reaction when the courageously limitless company, on hiatus for four years from their own NoHo Arts District space (where I got to "play" in the meantime with The Company Rep in Dürrenmatt's *Play Strindberg* and the Thorin Alexander/Max Kinberg's musical adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*) while their enormously successful mounting of *Big River* toured internationally, made known it would mark its return by attempting to undertake two already notoriously difficult Beckett and Albee one-acts.

Under the pristine but resourceful direction of Jevon Whetter, Deaf West veteran Troy Kotsur is mesmerizing in ol' Sam's one-person *Krapp's Last Tape*, a piece often rendered lethal in performance thanks to the playwright's compelling but merciless drone of disenchantment with the human condition. *Krapp's* can only be saved from drowning in its own woebegone and cynical rhetoric by an exceptional actor and inspired staging, and here in this glorious rechristening of the Deaf West Theatre, it couldn't be realized with more entrancing results.

Kotsur effortlessly brings a lager-than-life and decidedly risky Buster Keaton-like, almost pantomimed quality to the title role, while the equally committed Greg Bryan sits just out of the light giving voice to the character's ravings. The spooling and respooling of the infamous Tape 5 from Box 3 takes on curious new life as a video projected behind Krapp flutters by in grainy black and white as he watches himself 30 years younger, letting the sorrow of his battered and disillusioned advanced years form a sad counterpart to his own youthful enthusiasm captured on VHS tape.

It's a fresh and fascinating approach to the familiar material that's even more pronounced with Albee's early career-maker *The Zoo Story*. Brilliantly directed by Coy Middlebrook, who has craftily chosen to play the piece out on two adjacent Central Park benches, the dynamic and highly physical Tyrone Giordano (*Big River's* far more wide-eyed and enormously less jaded Huck Finn) and Kotsur, equally to be commended here for his subtlety as he is for his intentionally overplayed Krapp, respectively interpret that scary urban monster Jerry and the quietly respectable businessman Peter, two strangers who share one of the most beguiling and often unnerving two-character encounters in contemporary theatre.

On the less prominent bench sit Bryan and Jeff Alan-Lee, who have a challenging task they ace with great success: playing alternately amused and terrified observing bystanders while still finding the perfect emotional tone to simultaneously voice Peter and Jerry's dialogue to us less evolved audience members who don't know ASL. Just once before the end of the run, I'd love to see what these two fine actors could do with the roles all by themselves—bet they already know the blocking.

Karyl Newman's sparsely effective set designs for both pieces are also an asset, with Krapp's dismal lone room, complete with the obligatory single suspended raw lightbulb, brilliantly crafted to illuminate the videofeed and alternately show Krapp moving around in ever-expanding and shrinking shadows behind it. This innovatively gives way after act break to equally claustrophobic but glorious huge photographic tapestries of Central Park (ironically and eerily for me taken just around the corner from my New York flat... gotta watch for overly friendly strangers on my walks while I'm there from now on) looming grandly above a stage strewn with real fall-colored leaves. Jeremy Pivnik's evocative lighting and John Zalewski's barely perceptible sound plot also immeasurably help the production to celebrate this pair of groundbreaking contemporary classics.

Deaf West's indelible take on *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* is a great way to bring the company home, instantly showing that uniquely inspired mid-century avant-garde theatre and this uniquely inspired troupe belong together, as the heightened physicality of the actors and the heightened theatricality of the plays prove a splendid match indeed.

*Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* play through Feb. 18 at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Bl., NoHo; for tickets, call (818) 272-2773 or use (818) 508-8389 for TTY.

## Deaf West's Lonely Hearts Club a Pair of Beautiful One-Acts

By Kyle Moore

NORTH HOLLYWOOD - With winter's cold and rain settling in on the Valley as of late, Deaf West Theatre's selection of a pair of so-bleak-they're-beautiful one-acts to put together in a single night seems a matter of highly fortuitous timing. Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, coupled with Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* combine to paint an aching portrait of two lonely lives at their last unraveling.

Troy Kotsur gives an anguished dual performance as the titular Krapp both in the present, and on projected video as his younger, brasher self as he looks back on key mistakes that seemingly destroyed his life. You might think that there would be nothing less theatrically watchable than an aging, alcoholic and unsuccessful writer going through his diaries from 30



Photo by Theresa Halasz

Troy Kotsur and Tyrone Giordano in "The Zoo Story."

years ago, but thanks to some ingenious staging, *Krapp* is fully accessible to both hearing and deaf audiences.

Pairing Beckett's one-act with *The Zoo Story* makes for a bit of a long evening, but

Albee's prose is, above all else, damned fine storytelling. Tyrone Giordano is just this side of loony, but still engaging and sympathetic as Jerry, a wandering, desperately lonely New Yorker who draws Peter (Kotsur

again) into conversation in Central Park.

The deaf actors are aided by on-stage translation by Greg Bryan and Jeff Alan-Lee, both commendable in their voiced performances, with beautifully realized sets by Karyl Newman.

*Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* runs Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. through Feb. 18 at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Tickets are \$22 for evening performances, \$20 for matinees. For reservations, call (818) 272-2773 (voice) or (818)-508-8389 (TTY).

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2007

© THE TOLUCAN TIMES VOL. 63, NO. 06