

Reviews

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LAWEEKLY

MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE



Photo by Theresa Halzle

GO! In 1933 France, two submissive church-going maids named Christine and Lea Papin brutally murdered their employer and her daughter, a crime that riveted the country and set off a firestorm of debate about the conditions of the working poor. Handsomely staged, director Michael Unger's signed and spoken production of Wendy Kesselman's drama speculates around that event. Stockpiled with the minutiae of the maids' daily routine, it explores the increasingly bizarre psychological

dynamics between the perpetrators - the fastidiously capable Christine (Deanne Bray, voiced by Darrin Revitz) and her clumsier dependent sister, Lea (Amber Zion, voiced by Lindsay Evans), as well as their relationship with their mean "Madame" (Casey Kramer) and her docile daughter, Isabelle (Jennifer Losi). Performed without an intermission, the plot's unhurried rhythm reflects the excruciatingly slow pace of life in the setting's time and place. Bray and Zion are lovely and expressive in communicating the sisters' bond, forged ever more tightly in response to Madame's nitpicking cruelty, though Christine's dark side could be underscored more emphatically. Kramer's villainess is so fulsomely drawn as to border on caricature; this apparent directorial choice, made to emphasize the melodrama, is handled by this performer with considerable skill. And Losi projects an effective foil as the petulant Isabelle, whose impulses towards kindness are ultimately annihilated by her mother. Designers Tom Buderwitz' set, Leigh Allen's lighting and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes create an ambience of musty money contrasting aptly with this dark disturbing tale. Deaf West Theater, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.- Sat., 8 p.m.,; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru May 30. (818) 762-2773. <http://www.deafwest.org> (Deborah Klugman)

CALENDAR

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THEATER BEAT

Isolated, they gasp for air

In 1933, the savage murders of a French woman and her daughter by their live-in domestics gained international attention, inspiring Genet's "The Maids," Chabrol's "La Ceremonie" and Wendy Kesselman's award-winning 1980 play, "My Sister in This House."

Now Kesselman has rewritten her drama for a striking new production by Deaf West. Here, convent-raised siblings Christine (Deanne Bray) and Lea (Amber Zion) are deaf, intensifying their working-class subjugation and isolation. (Their roles are voiced by Darrin Revitz and Lindsay Evans.) The two girls serve the status-obsessed Madame (Casey Kramer) and her bored daughter, Isabelle (Jennifer Losi), who dine and primp their days away in stultifying petit-bourgeois style. (Tom Buderwitz's two-tiered set is a study in claustrophobic elegance.)

Abused since birth, their intimacy resented by their employers, the sisters retreat into a world of fantasy. Bray and Zion achieve an intensely erotic symbiosis, enhanced by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's exquisite costumes and Leigh Allen's evocative lighting. Even when the story becomes predictable, director Michael Unger and his cast create a rich world of ritual: serving dinner, getting ready for bed, card games, the Madame fingering the house with a white glove in a fervid search for dust. This may be the most embodied production I've ever seen in L.A.; unfortunately, some of the characterizations aren't as satisfying.

"My Sister" is an absorbing, often oppressive study of class and codependency. Or, as an audience member put it as we filed out of the theater, "Too much estrogen under one roof."

— CHARLOTTE STOUT

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE
BACKSTAGE

My Sister In This House at Deaf West Theatre

Reviewed by Dany Margolies April 29, 2010



PHOTO CREDIT
Theresa Halzle

Through the thoughtfulness of playwright Wendy Kesselman and director Michael Unger, this production ideally suits Deaf West Theatre and its imaginative yet nonintrusive melding of the hearing and nonhearing worlds. Kesselman reportedly reworked her 1981 play for this company, so here the Papin sisters, working as maids in the bourgeois home of a mother and adult daughter, are deaf. The themes are of class oppression, child abuse, religiosity, and sexuality. The sexual themes concern the two sisters and their extreme obsession with each other, hinted at throughout and culminating in a somewhat graphic demonstration.

That demonstration comes near the play's end, followed by a startlingly brutal act less hinted at but not unexpected. This play is based on real-life Christine and Lea Papin and their days working together in a French home in the 1930s. The production, running two hours and sans intermission, demands a sturdy, mature audience. It also helps to know the source material in advance, so that isolated vignettes are recognizable events in the sisters' lives. Otherwise, the very leisurely build, consisting of daily routines over the passing months, can seem tedious and choppy, sometimes made more so by odd pacing on opening weekend.

The Papin sisters are portrayed with nice details by Deanne Bray as the elder Christine and Amber Zion as the younger Lea. They speak ASL, translated for the hearing audience by actors Darrin Revitz and Lindsay Evans, seated primly at the side of the stage.

Bray plays Christine with what history tells us was paranoid schizophrenia, the actor slowly gliding from tender caretaker to disdainful roommate to obsessed lover. Zion plays Lea as fresh and naive at first, then weary, and finally totally compliant in the sisters' ultimate acts. The Papins' employers are hearing, their dialogue shown to the deaf audience on supertitles. Jennifer Losi plays the daughter, with a well-honed mix of comedy and pathos, a spoiled girl but one who feels the shackles of her overbearing mother. And, in a wickedly full-blown but not overly campy portrayal, Casey Kramer is said Maman, living majestically but realistically on Tom Buderwitz's set.

Presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. April 17–May 30. Thu.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (818) 762-2773. www.deafwest.org.

<http://www.backstage.com/bsa/reviews-la-theatre/my-sister-in-this-house-1004087767.story>

Carol Kaufman Segal's Reviews

My Sister In This House

My Sister In This House is an award-winning play written by Wendy Kesselman in 1980. It is based on a true incident that occurred in France in 1933; the brutal murders of a woman and her daughter by two young sisters who lived with and served as their domestics. At the Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood Michael Unger has directed a superb company of actors in this foreboding production.

The Papin sisters, Christine (Deanne Bray voiced by Rebecca Johnson, regularly Darrin Revitz) and Lea (Amber Zion voiced by Lindsay Evans) had abusive childhoods and were raised in a convent. They have been employed by class conscious Madame (Casey Kramer) and her flippant daughter Isabelle (Jennifer Losi) who fritter their days away in idleness. Their treatment of Christine and Lea is austere (Madame even checks every inch of the house for dust with a white glove.). But Christine and Lea are in no position to complain or to leave their jobs and find solace in their closeness with each other which seems to vex Madame. What eventually occurs in the play reveals what can happen when emotions are pushed to the brink.



Madame's house is a lovely two-story set by Tom Buderwitz, lighting by Leigh Allen, costume design by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg. Other cast members include Dan Callaway (voice of medical examiner and Judge, regularly played by Troy Kotsur as well as Court Interpreter and voiced by Matthew Jaeger).

Ed Waterstreet, Artistic Director of Deaf West Theatre founded the theatre in 1991, the first resident theatre company in America under the direction of a deaf artistic director. It is the only professional resident Sign Language theatre west of the Mississippi. Their work is always exceptional and I highly recommend **My Sister In This House**. It will continue through May 30.

Deaf West Theatre
5112 Lankershim Blvd.
North Hollywood
Ticket Information: Online at www.DeafWest.org, or (818) 762-2773

http://www.stagehappenings.com/Carol_Segal/reviews/_2010/mysister.php

Articles

Articles

Deanne Bray's Transition into Sister Role at Deaf West

FEATURES by [Ashley Steed](#) | April 19, 2010

In 1933 in Le Mans, France, two sisters – Christine and Lea Papin – were found in bed clutching each other after bludgeoning to death and gouging out the eyes of their employer Madam Danzard and her daughter, Isabelle. The murder became a case study for philosophers, psychoanalysts and academics as it brought up questions about behavioral tendencies between the classes. In 1980, playwright Wendy Kesselman re-examined the Papin sisters' relationship and eventual downfall, hoping to depict them in a sympathetic light. The result was the prize-winning play *My Sister in This House* now being re-envisioned at Deaf West Theatre, directed by Michael Unger.

Being a Deaf West show, the production is done in American Sign Language (ASL), spoken English and open captions. In this production the sisters are deaf, adding another layer to examine in this play about class, isolation and the need for connection.

I sat down with deaf actress Deanne Bray who plays the older, domineering sister Christine. "The Papin sisters grew up really poor and went through a very difficult life," Bray signs. "Then they got work as maids which were considered very stressful jobs. The sisters were called 'gems' as they were the perfect maids. They knew their place and were focused as they did their tasks. But they became oppressed by the way they were treated. Research shows [the Lancelins] took their wages and the sisters really weren't treated well."

Perhaps most perplexing was the sisters' calm and matter-of-fact demeanor when they were taken into custody. "After interrogation and analysis of the maids," informs Bray, the medical examiners "concluded they were normal and didn't show any sign of mental instability. They told the truth and said this is what happened. Eventually Christine did have some sort of a mental breakdown and went mad through the process."

Bray says if Christine were psychoanalyzed today she would most likely be diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. "There are a lot of unanswered questions that exist about what happened. People have their own stories and perceptions of what occurred."

She discusses her character Christine. "She has a beautiful spirit and she does her job very well. She works hard and her ability to focus is really inspiring. But she's also envious of her sister Lea. She loves her very much but there is bitterness towards the relationship that Lea and their mother have. Their mother didn't show Christine the same love and care as she does with her younger sister. She would never hurt them but there is a lot of bitterness inside her. And she's very sensitive. It doesn't make her a bad person, she's just fragile."

When Bray first read the play, she was intimidated by the role. “I thought to myself, I don’t know if I can play her. I’ve had to fully immerse myself. She’s a real person and very deep. Sometimes I wonder if she was bi-polar.”

She illustrates the difficult task of not only becoming Christine but also being able to leave her at the theatre when the day is through. “During rehearsals, sometimes the director would ask, ‘are you ok?’ and I would say, ‘yes, I’m fine.’ He met with me and said it was important I take care of myself. He said, ‘I know how much you’ve studied and care about this character but you need to push her aside when you go home. Detach yourself from her and take a break.’

“This is a really difficult role and it’s incredibly hard to fully integrate and become one [with the character]. So I need to mentally detach, do my thing, live my life and then come back and transition into the character. This process has been amazing. I’m constantly discovering new things and now I feel I can do this role. But my first reaction – I wasn’t sure if I could do it.”

Unger has not only directed this play before but he’s also familiar with ASL. “I’ve never worked with a hearing director before who watches the sign language and listens to the voices and is able to make sure they match,” reveals Bray. “He asks the translator why a certain sign is used or why they picked that translation. He discusses it with ASL master David Kurs. I’m happy to have that discussion as a part of the process. He’s sensitive to deaf culture. I feel comfortable with him.”

Unger has also contacted Kesselman to further delve into the play. According to Bray, he calls her every day to discuss the play. “He tells her what’s happening and she’ll change something. So he’s really in-tune with the writer and in making it right. Not many directors work that way.”

Unger even had Kesselman come out at the beginning of rehearsals and had her sit down with the cast to work on the play.

Bray began working with the ASL translation a week before rehearsals started. She and Kurs sat down and discussed the translations. “I wanted to use some French sign language like francs and maman, that’s French for mother.” She signs maman. “That’s their sign. But [Artistic Director] Ed [Waterstreet] said no. He doesn’t want to lose deaf audiences by having them see a sign and not know what it means. But David agreed we could use some old signs from the 1930s mixed with modern ASL. I also asked David whether or not I should move my mouth because [deaf] people back then didn’t move their mouths much. But it also depends on the background of the deaf individual.”

As already mentioned, Kesselman has been an active participant in this production. She even asked her publisher if she could write a deaf version of the play. This would mainly affect stage directions. “We try to be creative and find ways to turn away from each other,” says Bray.

For example, there’s a moment where Christine turns away while someone is talking. But with deaf people, you can’t do that. You need to be able to see the other person signing. But the need for Christine to turn away is thematically important in the play. They resolved this by adding a mirror. That way Christine can turn her back but be able to see Lea signing behind her through the mirror.

Bray uses a hearing aid to help her hear noises and read lips but for this production she has taken it off. “For past Deaf West productions,” discloses Bray, “I’ve had my hearing aid on. I can’t hear individual words but I can hear sounds which helps me stay in sync [with the voice actor]. But for this production, it’s the first time I’ve taken my hearing aid off. [The voice actor] and I still become one but I really have to immerse myself [into my character] so she has to really watch me.”

At the beginning of the rehearsal process Bray sat down with Darrin Revitz, who plays Christine’s voice, and had Revitz watch her sign the lines. She explains, “We needed to figure out if there are too many signs or too few. Or if she’s speaking too fast. I also don’t want her to have to speak too slowly – I want it to be natural. So there’s been an exchange between us to figure out [the pacing]. It’s harder now with my hearing aid off. So it’s the director’s responsibility to listen and watch to make sure we’re in sync. But Darrin does come up to me and say, ‘I’m with you, I’m following you.’ So that’s really cool.”

Bray and Revitz have really collaborated to fully realize this complex character. “The two of us discussed how Christine feels on every line.” Asking questions like “Is she stern or is she gentle?” She goes on, “We talked a lot about the colors of emotion and how every line is delivered. So it wasn’t only my decision, she decided also. We really became one with this character. Her thoughts are really important to me and I know my thoughts are important to her as well.”

Audiences might recognize Bray from the NBC show *Heroes* where she plays Emma, whose power is seeing sounds waves as colors. “I don’t know if it will get picked up for a fifth year. If so, and my character isn’t dead, the writers will have my character Emma back,” reveals Bray. So she doesn’t know exactly what’s next for her.

For now, Bray is excited about working with such a great cast, all of whom are passionate about the show. Casey Kramer and Jennifer Losi play Madam Lancelin and her daughter. Bray says she and Amber Zion, who plays the younger sister Lea, work wonderfully together. “There’s great chemistry between us. I feel really comfortable with her.”

Bray is interested in seeing how audiences will receive the play. “I know we’ll have an eclectic audience. Some will have strong reactions to the horrific acts [the sisters] committed. But I hope they will be able to go home and not judge the sisters so harshly – I hope they understand how extremely oppressed they were. We all have the right to be human and to live our lives.”

That was Kesselman’s aim in writing the play, says Bray. “She added a scene of the sisters as children. By starting with them as little girls it shows their sisterly love and the audience can connect with them [immediately]. Then they see them grown up and what they have to go through and then their terrible downfall. Wendy hoped audiences would sympathize with the sisters – even though their actions were unfathomable.”

The sister’s alleged incestuous relationship has also been a hot topic among scholars. In the play it is brought up, but delicately. When Unger directed the play in New York, the sisters were completely naked and the incestuous undertones were made overt. For this production

Kesselman asked that he not do that. It's still not as ambiguous as Bray would like. "That's one thing that bothers me about this play. I feel it's a bit much in the show. I wish it would be toned down and made subtle. That's what [Kesselman] intended in writing it. But the director has made it explicit and has them touching [each other]. I disagree with that choice but I'm following his direction," she reveals.

"I think less is better. And if it's factual, who knows. Maybe they did have that [kind of relationship]. But I think they were everything to each other: sister-sister, mother-daughter – they were really close. But their closeness was innocent, not for pleasure. They only had each other and were completely isolated."

What was once dubbed "the crime of the century" continues to fascinate and perplex. Deaf West's unique form of storytelling, I'm sure, will enrich the fascination. Perhaps this production will make us look at how isolation only hinders society rather than propels it forward; how we need to connect on an equal level. As Bray said, "We all deserve to be human... and treated thus."



Deaf West Theatre takes on famous French murder case in “My Sister in This House”

From Radio interview on KPCC, Southern California Public Radio by Steve Julian
Original airdate, April 24, 2010

80 years ago, the story of the Papin sisters took France by storm. They were white slaves to an upper class family, and it drove them to murder. Playwright Wendy Kesselman wrote “My Sister in This House,” a play based on the sisters’ story, in 1982. Now, with the help of director Michael Unger, she has adapted the script for a non-hearing audience at Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood. KPCC’s Steve Julian met with Unger, the deaf actresses, and their speaking counterparts. COME INSIDE for details and a transcript of Steve’s story.

THE DEAF WEST PRODUCTION OF “MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE” STARS TWO DEAF ACTRESSES, DEANNE BRAY AND AMBER ZION. THEY PORTRAY CHRISTINE AND LEA PAPIN.

ONSTAGE, THEY USE SIGN LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH MANY IN THE AUDIENCE. FOR THOSE WHO HEAR, THEIR WORDS ARE SPOKEN BY ACTRESSES DARRIN REVITZ AND LINDSAY EVANS.

IT SOUNDS A LITTLE COMPLICATED BUT, TRUST ME, AFTER SEEING DEAF WEST’S PRODUCTION OF “PIPPIN” LAST YEAR AT THE MARK TAPER FORUM, IT ALL MAKES SENSE.

FOR OUR INTERVIEW, I WAS JOINED BY ELIZABETH GREENE WHO TRANSLATED FOR AMBER, WHO PLAYS LEA, AND DEANNE, WHO PLAYS CHRISTINE.

EG: [Interpreting for Christine] It’s clear that Christine believed that, in a past life, she was Lea’s husband.

SJ: Christine and Lea were believed to have become lovers while in their twenties.

EG: [Interpreting for Christine] They were very, very close, but if they were lovers, it was in an innocent fashion.

SJ: When they were working as maids for the Lancelins in Le Mans, France, Christine and Lea were not allowed to converse with the residents, leave the house, or even use the bathroom – they had to use a bucket. Until one day...

EG: [Interpreting for Christine] We exchanged instruments with each other. I did exchange a hammer and other instruments with my sister, and we washed all of the blood off of ourselves. And then, when we came back, we put on our nightgowns and sat in bed, waiting for authorities to arrive.

SJ: They had brutally killed Madam Lancelin and her young daughter. I asked Amber if she could relate to the sense of isolation her character must have felt.

EG: [Interpreting for Lea] Yes, I can relate to it because, growing up deaf, I had a lot of oppression, myself, so I do feel a connection with Lea.

SJ: I could only imagine the interplay between the deaf and speaking actresses – whether either Lindsay or Darrin ever felt they were interpreting as opposed to acting?

DR: No! Because what they’re doing is almost like (EG: No, no, no! laughter) ... because what they’re doing—

EG: Christine wants to add input... Christine’s saying, when it comes time for Amber, who plays the character of Lea, myself, to have emotion or to cry, they are sitting in their chairs, our voice actors, with wet tears rolling down their faces. They are doing the crying, the real crying as much as we are. And when that actually happened in rehearsal, Christine says, director Michael Unger spoke up. He said, I don’t see four women. I see two women. [pause]

SJ: Darrin Revitz...

DR: But I do get intimidated sometimes and I don’t know sign language, so it’s hard to communicate, and I don’t want to make them uncomfortable, for lack of a better word, what is my ignorance of their language.

SJ: Director Michael Unger demands a level playing field for hearing and non-hearing audiences. He discovered during previews, for example, that deaf audience members didn't realize the women were screaming during blackouts. Elizabeth, speaking for Christine, explained...

EG: What they've added is some reverberation beneath the seats, plus flashbulbs, a flashbulb approach, of technical lighting. And at the same time the flashbulb goes off, the audience feels a rumbling, so there were moments that had to be shifted and adjusted to make the moment equitable for all.

DR: These worlds are not equal. He wanted the hearing audience to be out of their element for a portion of the show and the deaf audience to be out of their element for a portion of the show, which I think mirrors what you're seeing on stage in that it's not a parallel world.

SJ: "My Sister in This House" runs through May 20 at Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood. My thanks to Elizabeth Greene for interpreting the comments of deaf actresses Deanne Bray and Amber Zion. The double murders in 1933 also prompted French writer Jean Genet to write the play "The Maids." It opens April 29 at The Moth Theatre in Los Angeles. We'll have all those details at kpsc.org, click on Offramp. For Offramp, I'm Steve Julian