

Style

MONDAY, JANUARY 24, 2000

Ugliness and the Beast

By NELSON PRESSLEY
Special to The Washington Post

Canadian dramatist Judith Thompson's "Lion in the Streets" is a blitz of a play, and that's how the extremely promising new Project Y Theatre Company is performing it at the District of Columbia Arts Center. The drama shows a brutally murdered immigrant girl's posthumous quest for home—a quest for any safe haven. The girl's journey through a number of urban lives amounts to a tour of hell.

Thompson's characters smash into each other with an ugliness that is sometimes breathtaking, sometimes just plain repulsive. A man named Bill breaks up with his wife and gives her a nasty brush-off speech; she responds with a desperate sexual plea, cooing and gyrating right in front of all their friends.

"That has to be just about the worst thing I've ever seen happen to anyone," one of the witnesses says to someone afterward. Being

See THEATER, C5, Col. 4

'Lion': A Harrowing Excursion Into Urban Hell

THEATER, From C1

nasty creatures themselves, they both giggle.

The beat goes on: A group of parents gang up on a day-care worker about how much sugar she feeds their children. A woman who has bone cancer fantasizes about dying "beautifully," like Ophelia. (Her friend sets her straight about how "beautiful" it is to drown.) A young gay waiter goes into a church on a whim and encounters a Catholic priest who used to leer at him.

As this smorgasbord of miserable people expands, you begin to wonder what Thompson is angling at. And then we meet new, even more desperate characters (an angry woman with cerebral palsy who shares the details of her rich, possibly imaginary, sex life) and watch new horrors (a grisly homophobic attack). Isobel—the dead girl, who gazes at all of this from the edges—declares that she will fight this voracious lion in the streets, the same beast that strangled her (her bruised neck is sickly green). And you get the point, all right.

Thompson overdraws, of course. But not always; there are plenty of times when the characters seem honest (if repellent) and dead-on. And she's not merely out to horrify; there's an overarching sadness that almost transcends the shock value of the violence, and the play even has a few off-center lyrical moments that draw you into the characters.

Although the play ultimately disappoints, its dense, pugnacious vi-

sion cannot be dismissed entirely, and Project Y's disciplined, kinetic performance is remarkable. Director Michole Biancosino's cast attacks the material with the same breathless do-or-die energy of the recent German film "Run Lola Run." When Deanna Harris's Isobel begins to fight the metaphorical lion, she stands framed in a doorway upstage, punching and kicking the air to a driving techno beat while a knife fight unfolds in slo-mo downstage. The first act ends with a similar image: The entire cast appears to be drowning, then the tempo of the actions and Armit Prakash's sound design picks up until the same motions look not dreamy and tragic but mean and violent.

Christina Anderson, Sarah Bragin, Jon Cohn, Tyson Lien and Lindsay Allen—an admirably balanced ensemble—play about two dozen roles ranging from the noxious (Anderson's manipulative journalist) to the bitter (Bragin as the day-care worker and the cerebral palsy victim) to the touching (Lien as a trembling researcher, Harris's Isobel throughout).

Thompson's "Lion in the Streets," with its wide, angry, mournful tone, feels like a reverberating shotgun blast. Project Y gets this exactly right.

Lion in the Streets, by Judith Thompson. Directed by Michole Biancosino. Lights, Colin K. Bills; scenic design, David McKeever; costumes, Michole Biancosino. Through Feb. 5 at the D.C. Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW. Call 202-462-7833.