

Project Y's 'Zastrozzi': Bad Guy With Flair

By NELSON PRESSLEY
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"A man's got to know his limitations," Clint Eastwood snarled in one of his avenging-angel movies. In Project Y's production of George F. Walker's 1979 "Zastrozzi: The Master of Discipline," the title character says the same sort of thing in the same sort of circumstance: He kills his opponent stylishly, then murmurs: "You understood what was in your heart. But you did not know your limitations."

Zastrozzi is like Dirty Harry with a brain. He's amoral, a destroyer bent on weeding out the synthetic and the weak in the name of strengthening society. (This is only a rationalization; the truth, which involves his murdered mother, is more complicated.) The plot, set in 19th-century Europe, involves Zastrozzi's pursuit of Verezzi, a blithely grinning Christian who doubles as a moronic artist, protected by a virtuous and ordinary man named Victor.

For a Walker play, "Zastrozzi" is fairly stuffy. Project Y's young actors sometimes sound as if they're suffocating on the pompous language; even Zastrozzi continually refers to himself as "Zastrozzi." Worse, Zastrozzi is a cliché of the Evil Genius, so smart that everything except destruction bores him. Surely there is an original way to play this sort of figure, but Jonathon Church shows up with a cold stare, a shaved head and a goatee, clipping off his syllables like a James Bond bad guy.

Still, not for nothing has Walker become a local staple. Each time the drama threatens to get tedious, the Canadian playwright jazzes things up, and as he does, director Michole Biancosino's production begins to find its own cool appeal. Zastrozzi's girlfriend, Mathilda, for example, is a strapping amazon who wields a wicked sword and is acclaimed as Europe's greatest seductress. Rebekah Parshall, clad in "Mad Max" gear of leather boots, fishnet stockings and a short ripped skirt, slashes and growls like a tiger in the role.

To balance the sexual scales—and to give everybody, including Zastrozzi's brutal henchman, Bernardo (Grady Weatherford), someone to pursue—there is a virgin named Julia (Jenifer Nall, wearing virginal pink and white). Verezzi (Alex Cramer, acting with open-mouthed naïvete) naturally falls in love with Julia. But Zastrozzi assigns the alluring Mathilda (who accuses the prim Julia of making her look like "a tart") the task of driving Verezzi to distraction. And for a lark, Zastrozzi can't help but bend Julia to his will.

The moral question doesn't tighten its grip on you as it does in Walker's best plays. But though the drama errs on the side of pretension, Walker



BY BEN PREMEAUX

Rebekah Parshall and Jonathon Church in "Zastrozzi."

is apparently incapable of being boring. When the ultra-violent Zastrozzi conquers Julia, he does it verbally, and the conquest is no less devastating for its lack of physical action.

And anyway, there's plenty of mayhem at the Dirty Harry finish. The climactic scenes in the District of Columbia Arts Center's small black-box theater, given a dungeon look by Alex Cooper's low candlelight design, unwind like a good action movie. Church (whose Zastrozzi actually gets interesting whenever the actor puts the character's mind ahead of his diction) does fabulous work—presumably under Biancosino's supervision—as the show's fight captain. The stage combat is precise and dangerous-looking, and the characters die with Hollywood flair.

Zastrozzi, by George F. Walker. Directed by Michole Biancosino. Set, Matt Soule; sound, Amit Prakash; costumes, Rhonda Key. Through Jan. 20 at the District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW. Call 202-462-7833.

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