

Difficult 'Emigrants' goes deep

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First produced in 1975, "The Emigrants," by eminent Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek, conceals a cargo of sly social protest under a layer of philosophical obtuseness. As with much drama from the Cold War-era Eastern bloc, the play is unwieldy, laborious and pointedly discursive, a kind of coded message intended to blind the watchdogs of totalitarianism to its subtly dissident themes.

Director Neno Pervan, working from a translation by Henry Beissel, effectively tightens the dialectic of Mrozek's often rambling two-person play in his crisp and no-frills staging. Neatly skirting caricature at every turn, Tim Choate and Zoran Radanovich convey their characters' comical desperation without pandering to their obvious absurdities.

Choate plays AA, a political dissident from an unnamed country who has fled to another unnamed country, where he lies low -- literally -- in a squalid basement flat (Lada Pervan's nicely realized set) that he shares with his countryman XX (Radanovich). In dramatic contrast to the cerebral AA, XX is a brutish laborer who hopes to make a fortune abroad and return home in glory to his wife and children someday. Yet, as the play progresses, it becomes obvious that both are as trapped in their present circumstances as night crawlers in a roach motel.

In essence, the play is simply a prolonged conversation, starting with prosaic observations about bus stops and insects and progressing to a penetrating discussion about the roles of slaves and masters in a dictatorship. Bitter arguments follow at every twist in topic, and violence threatens to erupt at every turn.

Not for escapists, this is difficult material, well done by a capable company. Arduous and at times difficult to follow, it may reward those who brave its obscurities.

-- F. Kathleen Foley