

Inhuman

by Amy Krivohlavek

The Book of the Dun Cow reviewed February 12, 2006

Dread, terror, and paranoia

run rampant through our society these days, the newspapers tell us, promulgated by the forces of war and an ever-growing culture of fear. Ostensibly written in response (and protest) to the Vietnam War, Walter Wangerin, Jr.'s prescient novel *The Book of the Dun Cow* is an antiwar diatribe that also parallels the current war in Iraq.

Randy Courts and Mark St. Germain have adapted Wangerin's material into the most unlikely of forms—a musical—with quite thrilling results. In this haunting and cerebral production by the Prospect Theater Company, *The Book of the Dun Cow* examines existential questions of war, its motivations, and the responses it generates.

And did I mention that the protagonists are animals?

Welcome to an alternative universe where animals are the keepers of the earth, presided over by the gregarious and slightly pompous rooster Chauntecleer. When a neighboring ruler, Senex, decides to produce an heir, he unwittingly brings forth Cockatrice and the evil of the underworld (Wyrms). As animals begin to die, Chauntecleer must make difficult decisions about war and its consequences.

Although you might be tempted to interpret the show (the first act, at least) as an allegorical tale that predicts the coming of the Dun Cow (a savior figure of sorts), Wangerin's story pushes beyond the simple assignation of roles to a more complex narrative. As a result, characters are rich and multidimensional, but the story itself is so densely written that it is often difficult to tease out a clear sense of what has actually taken place (and why).

But in a story chronicling war, you might argue, this ambiguity is so much the better. War is, after all, cloaked in mystery; as Chauntecleer's wife (the hen Pertelote) queries, in the darkness of battle, "Who can tell who's right?"

Director Cara Reichel has created a thoroughly believable world for her characters, paying careful attention to the inherent power of storytelling. When the Narrator (Jacob Grigolia-Rosenbaum) takes the stage, he carefully opens a book. The animals file on wordlessly, giving the Narrator their undivided attention. As he begins the story, the characters come to life to act out the tale.

And although the Narrator somewhat perplexingly closes the book before the show ends,



Vanessa June Marshall, Brian Munn, and David Foley Jr.
Photo Credit: Cara Reichel

THE BOOK OF THE DUN COW

West End Theatre

Category: Musical
Written by: Book and lyrics by Mark St. Germain and music and lyrics by Randy Courts, adapted from the novel by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

Directed by: Cara Reichel

Produced by: Prospect Theater Company

Opens: February 4
Closes: February 26
Running Time: 2 hours, 20 minutes

Theater: West End Theatre

Address: 263 West 86th Street
New York, NY 10024

BOX OFFICE



Vanessa June Marshall and Brian Munn as Pertelote the Hen and Chauntecleer the Rooster

Photo Credit: Cara Reichel

this too seems a conscience choice. "Is this the moment when the animals' story becomes our story?" wondered the friend who accompanied me. We weren't able to come up with a definitive answer, but the debate that ensued over this and other plot points indicated that *The Book of the Dun Cow* is replete with questions—imperative ones worth thinking about.

Courts and St. Germain's sophisticated, contemporary score, buttressed by percussion and guitar, has a sound all its own, full of lavish harmonies and evocative melodies. Marcus Baker leads

an accomplished orchestra through the fine orchestrations provided by Courts and Daniel Feyer.

Portraying an animal can be a risky endeavor for an actor (the risk of embarrassment certainly runs high), but—thanks in part to David Withrow's intriguing and resourceful costume design—the performers are fully believable in their anthropomorphic state. Rather than attempting to realistically "transform" the actors into animals, Withrow merely suggests their animalistic traits. Boots, corsets, and vests form the standard uniform; a red scarf suggests a rooster's wobble, while the dog Mundo Cani sports a canine-channeling droopy hat. Hand puppets add another innovative touch.

Similarly, the performers, with a few exceptions, do not overplay their animal affectations, wisely opting for more subtle mannerisms. As a whole, this is a fierce ensemble of actors, wholly dedicated to their task. As the sparring roosters Cockatrice and Chauntecleer, Micah Bucey and Brian Munn dominate the proceedings with powerful, captivating performances. Vanessa June Marshall brings delicate sensitivity and a crystal voice to Pertelote, and David Foley Jr. offers a tender and mighty-voiced performance as Mundo Cani.

Paulo Seixas has provided an appealing multilevel set for the actors, but unfortunately Jessica Hendricks's choreography often fails to take full advantage of it. After exhilarating battle scenes and affecting group montages, the simplistic choreography in many of the full-ensemble songs often undermines its intricate accompaniment. This cast and this story, in other words, deserve more than a simple "step, touch, repeat" routine.

Why do we fight, and what do we hope to accomplish? What can we ever accomplish? Like the recent film *Munich*, *The Book of the Dun Cow* argues that even as we work to stamp out evil, it will always find a way to regenerate itself. Although the musical very nearly collapses under the weighty questions it poses, it is an intriguing inquiry into fundamental questions. When confronted with evil, do we resist violence, Chauntecleer asks, or do we "become a rat to kill a rat"?

Tickets: \$15.00

none

Phone: (212) 352-0255

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Randy Courts (music & lyrics) and Mark St. Germain (book & lyrics)

Directed by: Cara Reichel

Produced by: Prospect Theater Company

Lighting Design: Stacey Boggs

Sound Design: Sara Bader

Set Design: Paulo Seixas

Costume Design: David Withrow

Choreographer: Jessica Hendricks

Music Director: Marcus Baker

Orchestrations: Randy Courts and Daniel Feyer

Cast

Micah Bucey as
Cockatrice
Alexander Elisa as
Lord Russel/Wyrm
David Foley Jr. as
Mundo Cani
Jacob Grigolia-
Rosenbaum as
Narrator
Carol Hickey as
Beryl/Dun Cow

Suzanne Houston as
Hen/Mouse
Child/Basilisk
Amy Hutchins as
Hen/Mouse Child/Five
Pin/Basilisk
Jesse Kearney as
Ant/Scarce
Thadd Krueger as
Ant/Senex/One
Pin/Basilisk
Susan Maris as Widow
Mouse
Vaness June Marshall
as Pertelote
Brian Munn as
Chauntecleer
Jessica Ordman as
Hen/Mouse Child/Ten
Pin/Basilisk
Bo Ranney as Tick
Tock/Nimbus
Robby Sharpe as John
Wesley
David Stallings as
Ant/Ebenezer/Basilisk
Esther Triggs as
Hen/Mouse
Child/Basilisk

Orchestra:

Conductor/Piano I:

Marcus Baker

Piano II: Kristen

Rosenfeld

Guitar: Jason

Atkinson

Percussion:

Alexander Rea

Crew

Stage Manager:

David A. Vandervliet

Production Manager:

Travis I. Walker

Assistant Director:

Dev Bondarin

**Assistant Stage
Manager:** Amy
Cavanaugh
**Assistant Musical
Director:** Kristen
Rosenfeld
**Assistant Scenic
Designer/Scenic
Painter:** Shu Yuan
Chan
**Assistant Scenic
Designer/Master
Carpenter:** Nate
Tooker
**Assistant Costume
Designer/Wardrobe
Master:** Alisha Silver
**Assistant Lighting
Designer/Master
Electrician:** Matthew
Flick
Board Operators:
Sherod Green
Box Office Manager:
Diana Cordoso