



KOSHER HARRY

Nicu's Spoon and NY Deaf Theatre at Nicu's Spoon

British writer Nick Grosso's absurdist *Kosher Harry* is more a collection of bilious racist rants than a play. As such, it would seem an odd choice for the ultra-liberal Nicu's Spoon or the disability- and difference-savvy NY Deaf Theatre. But it turns out that ambition is the calling card of these two collaborating companies. They have much method to their madness in giving this play its U.S. premiere.

Kosher Harry's is the name of a deli catering to the often wealthy, often Jewish residents of swanky nabe St. John's Wood in London. The normal harmonies of regulars chatting up the waitresses while sipping tea or munching cheese knish are sent into discord by the arrival of a genially provocative young man played, as are all four of the play's characters, by two actors, one speaking and one using American Sign Language in a fascinating stereophonic style (Andrew Hutchinson speaking, Kimberly Mecane signing in this case).

It only takes a minute to adjust to the double casting, and one quickly merges the two simultaneous performances, much like the two images in a pair of binoculars meld into one. That the actors occasionally comment on or interact with their doppelgangers is more than just a practical stage device for an audience composed partially of the deaf or hearing-impaired. It becomes a perfect cracking open of the wrenching thematic content about how we split ourselves in two when we indulge in fostering divisions between our experience and that of those we label "other."

A kooky waitress with tortoise-shell glasses and dangling lemon-and-lime-colored earrings (S. Barton-Farcas speaking, Jennifer Giroux signing) starts out flirting with the young man but quickly begins a screed against her unseen fellow server, who emigrated from the former Soviet Union. "All they do is gossip about you," she says hypocritically. "Sowing the seeds of conflict." But the waitress' sexual jealousies and blatant xenophobia only set the stage for similarly casual arias of attack by a cabbie (Alvaro Sena speaking, Michael DiMartino signing) and his charge, a widowed grand dame supposedly half deaf herself and confined to a wheelchair (Wynne Anders speaking, Shira Grabelsky signing).

The speaking actors appear to have more stage training than their signing counterparts. Anders' old woman is exceedingly touching in her wistful bemusement, and Sena's cabbie makes a kind of ballet out of his foul-mouthed leering and swagger. And while the staging (Barton-Farcas and Aaron Kubey share directing duties) is mostly stagnant, the two-hour barrage of vitriol becomes overwhelming.

The lesson of *Kosher Harry* is exceedingly timely and apt: Hatred is most dangerous when embedded and normalized into the daily rituals and conversations of our lives.

*Presented by Nicu's Spoon in association with NY Deaf Theatre
at Nicu's Spoon, 38 W. 38th St., 5th floor, NYC.
Oct. 12-28. Wed.-Sun., 8 p.m.
(212) 352-3103 or www.theatermania.com.*

Reviewed by Christopher Murray

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