



"Top Ten Theater
Albums of 2004"
– Jonathan Frank,
Talkin' Broadway

SIN
DOWN

News from AmericanTheater Web

[Plain Text Version for Printing](#)

Afraid of Where The Country's Heading? So are These Playwrights

Screen Play; Gravediggers

ATW Review

6/8/2005

...One assumes that this is Gurney himself warning about Americans' passivity of late, and, thus, by extension, imagines that he would be a supporter of a new show playing at the Ontological Theater, a production of the youthful Wreckio Ensemble, *Gravediggers*.

In this work written and directed by Karly Maurer, the audience is transported to a barren landscape reminiscent (courtesy of scenic designer Dechelle Damien) of that found in Beckett's "Godot". In an environment filled with huge cement stone blocks and a barren tree – except for the huge red growth that hangs from spindly, finger-like branches, two government lackeys are in charge of disposing of corpses by throwing them into a vast pit. The dead bodies are the casualties of an interminable war that has gripped their country.

As Maurer's play begins, the gravediggers, who are clad in black, butcher-like robes and sport safety goggles and wield tiny shovels, are in mid-argument. When a woman, pushing her adult son in a baby carriage arrives, the gravediggers hope that the strangers might help to resolve the debate about whether the berry hanging from the tree has grown or not. Instead of settling the debate, the appearance of these two only opens further issues. Among them, why is the government so insistent that these two employees ensure that one body in particular is disposed of? And how will the mother's son avoid being drafted into the country's army (ironically announced as the "winning lottery player" for the day.

As *Gravediggers* spirals out its often absurd, frequently dark, sometimes slapstick, always biting tale, one comes to see frightening parallels to recent events in this country. For instance, the corpse belongs to a corporal captured by enemy forces, but the government has recently announced the corporal has been released, only to announce that she has been captured once again. Here, it's impossible to not think of captured Private Jessica Lynch.

The berry in the tree also becomes a wonderfully vivid metaphor as it first falls into the pit, later begins to swell, and finally, hatches a bright red phoenix that a visiting government official attempts to turn into a commercial tourist attraction. (At which point, *Gravediggers* masterfully skewers the marriage of politics and big business.)

Maurer is clearly angry, but it hasn't dulled her sense of the comic potential and she's ensured that her actors bring the right measure of arch comedy to their roles. As the Gravediggers, Dechelle Damien and Michelle Diaz spar with one another like latter day Laruel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello types. Randi Berry plays the well-to-do mother with just the right level of Margaret Dumont imperiousness and daftness. Benjamin Spradley brings a grinning insidiousness to "Rep" the government official. Nicholas Bixby and Dimitra Bixby play, respectively, the son and corpse with quiet dignity – even as an ill-fated romance blossoms between the two.

Without a doubt, Gurney's *Screen Play* will be the more accessible of these two plays. *Gravediggers*, though, is an equally playful and thought-provoking piece. I think audiences will have a good time at both. On the evening that I went to *Gravediggers*, I was told that the company had had trouble in attracting audiences in the days before Tonys. For this reason, I'd like to think that audiences hungry for political theater might help out the underdog and take in *Gravediggers*. Of course, what they should really do is catch both. The two shows make marvelous companion pieces.

Gravediggers continues through 25 at the Ontological Theater (131 East 10th Street). Performances are Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 8pm. Tickets are \$20 and can be purchased by calling 212-352-3101.

-- Andy Propst