

# 'Beauty' isn't a prude

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Yale Cabaret's *Sleeping Beauty* may share a title with the classic Perrault story, but for those who are searching for a brief return to childhood, be forewarned: the play is less "ever after" and more existential and evocative.

An American premiere, the inventive (albeit controversial) script was written by Austrian Elfriede Jelinek, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. This production is the first time her work has been produced in the United States.

A politically outspoken one-time member of the Communist Party, Jelinek is often criticized for her unconventional approaches to literature and drama. This diversion from the norm is apparent even in the structure of the play which, instead of relating a dialogue between two characters, consists of lengthy monologues.

This emphasis on very dense, extended portions of text can present a problem for the audience, especially considering its cerebral quality. Jelinek dives under the surface of the classic fairy tale of a princess awoken by a prince's kiss to explore questions regarding the dangers of self-obsession and whether one exists only through one's relationship with another; the latter idea is unsubtly driven into the viewer's consciousness by lights spelling out the word "being" on the wall.

An hour of this philosophical discourse could be mind-numbing and overwhelming, but this trap inherent in the script is avoided by director Yana Ross DRA '06, the crew and the two-person cast, all students at the Yale School of Drama. The production, thanks to their emphasis on the visual, continues to keep the audience captivated.

Ross, who discovered the script in a theater magazine, said, "When I read it, I started seeing pictures." She brought these

images to the stage in the form of "video art," which is projected intermittently onto the stage. (Although the segments were not viewable at final dress rehearsal, they are now incorporated into the production). These short video clips were inspired by the work of Dan Langston, which was recently on display at the local Artspace gallery, and installation artist Paul McCarthy.

The subjects of the video clips correspond to and inform the action onstage. At one point, they show a woman sobbing after the death of her significant other, mourning the death of her "soul through him," an obvious relation to the idea of existing through relationships that the characters discuss.

Finally, the actors complete the visual aspect of their performance with their physical interpretations of their words. Although she is hampered by her need to remain in a still, sleep-like state for a good portion of the play, Princess (Sofia Gomez DRA '06) maintains this dazed, stupor-like role while still infusing her words with emotion; her face remains extremely expressive even when she cannot move. As she begins to assert her own power throughout the course of the play, her movements become more fluid, reflecting the range of her character.

Prince (Mike Floyd DRA '06) on the other hand, is almost simian-like in his overtly physical portrayal, exerting raw, animalistic power. While his qualities juxtaposed to those of the constrained Princess are interesting, and also disturbing when he announces, after he has raised the princess from the dead, that he is God, there is very little variation in his role; rather, it is Princess who must change to match him.

Although the video projections and physicality of the actors serve to help the audience maneuver through the existential references, at times this detracts from the text itself. Much of Jelinek's play has to do with sexual experience and awakening; the classic kiss which revives Princess is reinterpreted here as a performance of cunnilingus. Both characters are constantly involved in a sexual power play, which they imitate through their provocative actions. Yet, as this carefully-crafted relationship between the sexes devolves into a five-minute sequence of pure simulated sex, it

becomes less powerful, and more of an amusing, slightly uncomfortable, caricature of "experimental" or "avant-garde" theater.

Nevertheless, between the divisive script and its visual interpretations, you will have something to talk about as you leave Yale Cabaret. Behind the philosophical posturing and physicality lies a fundamental tale about the nature of human relationships.

"I zeroed in on this timeless love story," Ross commented. "That's what we're trying to tell."