

Hypocrites launch Woyzeck Project with a bang

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"Woyzeck," the brief but riveting play left in fragmentary form when its German author, Georg Buchner, died of typhoid fever at the age of 23, has had an immense impact on all of modern art.

An almost ritualistic depiction of how a human being can be driven to the breaking point, Buchner's drama (written in 1836, and first produced in 1913) not only became a cornerstone of the German Expressionist movement, but inspired a masterful opera by Alban Berg, several movies (including one by Werner Herzog), a song by Tom Waits and countless theatrical riffs.

Now, six Chicago theater companies have joined forces for the Woyzeck Project, a multifaceted exploration of Buchner's provocative work. The two full-fledged productions that opened this weekend and will run in rotating repertory are adapter-director Sean Graney's blistering and altogether superb take on the play for The Hypocrites, and About Face Theatre's expertly acted production of "Pony," Sylvan Oswald's tale that primarily uses "Woyzeck" as an excuse for exploring extreme issues involving sexual identity. Both shows are on the mainstage of the Chopin Theatre, where they deftly share many elements of Tom Burch's elemental set design, which comes with an enigmatic, "Twin Peaks"-like alienation factor.

Buchner's story, at once primal and modern, tells of a young soldier who has fathered a baby with the beautiful but unreliable Marie, his common-law wife. Desperate to earn extra money, Woyzeck subjects himself to an experimental program testing the mental and physical effects of a long-term diet consisting only of peas. The deprivation of that diet, combined with dehumanizing relationships at work, and most crucially, with Marie's infidelity, drive him to murder.

Graney, who has taken a Brechtian approach to the play — adding powerhouse songs by composer Kevin O'Donnell and a fascinating soundscape created by by Mikhail Fiksel and the actors — gives us a backdrop of army life and hazardous materials' cleanup work. His Woyzeck (the ideal Geoff Button, boyish yet intense) is matched by the easy allure and fire of Marie (Lindsey Gavel, a tall, stunning, luminous-faced redhead). And for his searing, hourlong telling of the story, Graney also has tapped a terrific ensemble, with Ryan Bollettino as the narcissistic Herr Doktor; Sean Patrick Fawcett as the puffed-up, morals-spouting Captain; Erin Barlow as Kathe, Marie's "friend"; Walter Briggs as Marie's handsome, fascistic lover; Ryan Bourque as Woyzeck's only friend, and Zeke Sulkes, ideally fey in several roles. Izumi Inaba's deftly color-coded costumes are standouts in this real yet stylized staging that is not only a thrilling take on Buchner's classic, but an example of Graney working at the top of his powers.

For her About Face production of "Pony," director Bonnie Metzger also has gathered excellent actors who give their all to Oswald's confusing look at an unsolved crime of passion and to the profound stresses that result from living any one of the many possible variations on non-heterosexual life. (A glossary of terms is included in the program.)

Set in a rural, Western town, "Pony" offers a Marie who in this case is bisexual (played by leggy, sexy Kristina Valada-Viars). She is being pursued by two people: Woyzeck's equivalent, Pony (Kelli Simpkins), a lanky, cowboylike, unemployed "trans man" (a woman who identifies as a man), who subjects himself to psychological testing for pay at a clinic run by Cav (Janet Ulrich Brooks in old-school butch mode), and by Stell (Jessica Hudson), a punk-grunge lesbian hot for cash and short on requited love. A subplot involves Heath (Matthew Sherbach), a city kid who is now (but wasn't always) a nerdy gay boy.

The unseen crime of passion here remains fuzzily explained, at best. The rest of Oswald's episodic play is primarily about sexual ambivalence of every sort, and the price of hiding oneself. "Pony" is no "Woyzeck."

Note: In addition to these shows, the Woyzeck Project includes Oracle Productions' take on Buchner's play, directed by the excellent Max Truax, and extended through May 21 at its 3809 N. Broadway home (where you can pay what you wish or attend free); plus, many readings and discussions presented by Collaboraction, Route 66 Theatre Company, The Inconvenience and the very interesting Chicago Opera Vanguard. For details, visit www.thewoyzeckproject.com.