

Prodding the Malchick

It takes a big pair of *yarbles* to stage *A Clockwork Orange*, which Brandon Alan McClenahan does — ambitiously and imperfectly — at the Onyx

BY KELLE SCHILLACI

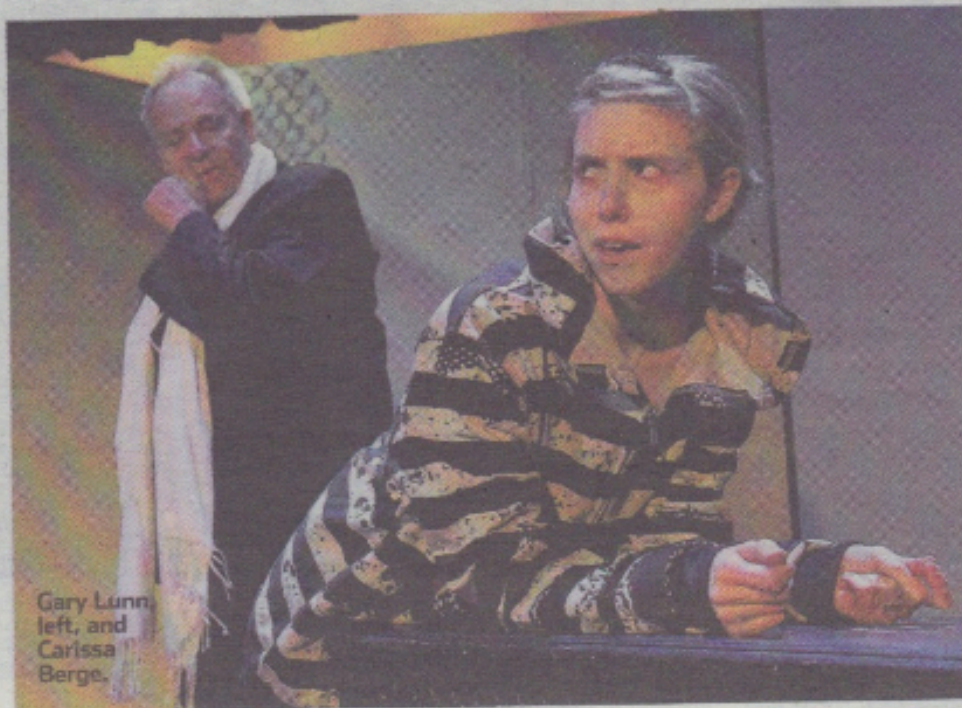
Friday night's sold-out Onyx Theatre crowd was ready for a night of horror-show ultraviolence at the Korova Milkbar, anxious to see how *A Clockwork Orange: A Play With Music* would work on the stage. Added pressure aside, the performance, co-produced by QuadraNine and Off-Strip Productions, marked its ambitious Vegas debut last weekend, not without its share of triumphs and challenges.

For one, there's the cult following of Stanley Kubrick's famous 1971 film — which, like the novel, tells the disturbingly not-so-futuristic story of young Alex, who, as a result of some dastardly deeds of violence perpetrated along with his fellow “droogs,” finds himself at the center of an inhumane “rehabilitation” program administered by a corrupt government.

“On the one hand, [the film's popularity] means a built-in audience for the play,” says director Brandon Alan McClenahan. The problem is, despite the fact that the play mirrors Anthony Burgess' dystopian 1962 novel — the one that inspired the Kubrick movie — it offers a different and far more optimistic ending than its cinematic adaptation, one that's not always favored by Kubrick die-hards. Then again, Burgess wasn't a big fan of Kubrick's interpretation, either.

“Kubrick left the film open-ended; he chose the theme of choice,” says McClenahan, who prefers the closure offered in the novel and play versions, both of which contain a final chapter left out of the film adaptation. “I love the movie for the movie itself, but not as much for the storytelling elements. It doesn't offer a resolution. In the play, we get to see what happens to Alex.”

For the play to succeed, a lot rides on Alex. Foremost, he's a kid who, after being repeatedly turned against by his society, his friends, even his parents, resorts to deviance as his only viable outlet. His cleverness and appreciation of beauty, art and music should be portrayed with as much importance to his



Gary Lunn, left, and Carissa Berge.

COURTESY: RICHARD BRUSNY



Alex (Berge) in *A Clockwork Orange*.

character as the easy manner with which he delivers acts of ruthless violence. As Alex, Carissa Berge's comparatively smaller stature grants enormous impact to scenes of violence both perpetrated by and toward Alex. However, she handles his transformations with not enough of the character's swagger and sensitive side.

“We do what the story tells us, and we are

trying to be true to the script. Our job is in the storytelling itself,” says McClenahan, addressing the risky creative choices made by himself, assistant director Sam Craner and the rest of the crew.

Taking cues from Burgess' inventive “Nadsat” language — a hybrid dialect drawing upon English, Slavic and Russian roots — choreographer Jenna Wurtzberger incor-

porates onstage dance elements (performed by Cheryl Snow) blending European and Russian ballet influences, designed, McClenahan says, to "syncopate the language with the movement onstage."

The dancing, along with music featuring Burgess' lyrics set to Sandy Stein's original compositions, heighten the author's redemptive theme without resorting to show-tune schmaltz — though it still feels out-of-step with the more expected scenes of onstage rape, images of Nazi-camp violence and boys with strap-ons simulating homo-erotic threesomes. Such discord, however, seems at the heart of the director's vision.

The cast is handed its fair share of challenges — adoption of the dialect, overly long and elaborate set changes, the juggling of multiple roles, to name a few — which it delivers with sturdy competence. But the staged action, particularly the fights, while neatly choreographed, feels tentative. A more stylized slow-motion scene early on works well, but the tactic is quickly abandoned.

Meanwhile, actors I've seen shine elsewhere seem hesitant here, carefully sticking to their scripts, not yet losing themselves to their fictional beings. Notable exceptions include Gary Lunn as the chaplain, who directs his heartfelt pulpit speech at the audience as if we, too, are complicit in the government's scheme; and Taylor Hanes, as conflicted Alexander, torn between helping and punishing Alex for his unforgivable atrocities.

"There's this surplus of violent and sexual tension that needs to explode," says McClenahan, aptly describing the feeling of the youth trapped in Burgess' fictional — and, really, our own — repressed societies. Are we so jaded by our own real-life horror show and the images broadcast on the nightly news that Alex's tale, in and of itself, simply fails to shock or surprise us?

Ultimately, the task of staging this production is an ambitious and very commendable one. McClenahan has brought together all the necessary parts. It's time now to simply pull the pin and let the cast explode.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE: A PLAY WITH MUSIC

Friday-Sunday, 8 p.m., through February 9; Sunday, February 10 at 2 p.m.; Onyx Theatre, 953-168 E. Sahara Ave., www.onyxtheatre.com, \$20