

# These monsters have a message

## THEATRE

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE

### The Monster Trilogy

Written by R. M. Vaughan  
Directed by Moynan King  
Starring Caroline Gillis,  
Ann Holloway, Kirsten Johnson  
At Buddies in Bad Times Theatre  
in Toronto  
Rating: ★★★

Women and children do go first in R. M. Vaughan's *The Monster Trilogy*, but there's nothing chivalrous or heroic about this privileged order. The three women "engaged in the world of violence," to borrow Vaughan's expression, elbow their way through an arena traditionally overpopulated by male figures. In doing so, they often take children (theirs or someone else's) with them on their doomed journeys.

Even if current headlines are, regrettably, full of female victims

and male perpetrators, the skillfully written and probing *Monster Trilogy* revels in a gender twist on this fact. Violence, or at least a capacity for physical, verbal or imagined violence, is not exclusive to men. We do our society a grave disservice when we turn women's association with violence into a national fetish or an aberration. See the Karla Homolka files for an immediate case in point.

The three monologues — written and presented separately over the last decade and played collectively here for the first time — are therefore part of a continuum on the notion of women and violence. The word triptych (as opposed to trilogy) was even suggested by a perceptive critic in the printed edition of the texts. The possibilities and, by implication, the irrationality of religious miracles, for example, unite the three women in unexpected ways.

To facilitate this notion of continuum, director Moynan King presents all three pieces on different parts of the stage of Buddies in Bad

Times Theatre, where her production kicked off its 27th season. Action and stage time, however, are spliced and allowed to overlap. The first monologue, *The Susan Smith Tapes*, is effectively used as a framing device for the whole evening. Its own structure (separate video letters written to TV talk-show hosts by the real-life, media-conscious South Carolina woman who drowned her two boys in a lake) provides an opportunity to interpose the other two pieces. (The same piece was made into a CBC short film that's frequently screened with commercial breaks, so it's no stranger to interruptions.) That *The Susan Smith Tapes* never loses any of its power in the process is a testament to Vaughan's deep understanding of the psychology of such a woman — who knows the difference between admitting doing evil things and having evil things happen to her — and to Kirsten Johnson's mesmerizing performance. Her southern accent, self-absorbed presence and class-consciousness are frighteningly believable yet otherworldly. She is so disconnected from her world that her physical presence on stage and her image projected on the video screen are almost of two separate women.

The vigour of the writing is sustained in *A Visitation by St. Teresa of Avila upon Constable Margaret Chance*, even if Ann Holloway's performance was played (and received by the opening-night crowd) too much for laughs for my liking. I don't blame her since, of all three, Vaughan uses out-and-out humour to sketch and ease us into a picture of racist, intolerant policewoman in a state of panic over a "kill gene" she may have passed to her son. The ridiculousness of her dilemma doesn't mask the extent of her bigotry, or the glimpse of sympathy and hope Vaughan holds out for her — manifested in the final visitation of a saint known for her thinking and intellectually curious ways. Perhaps Margaret will revisit her own firmly held beliefs after this visitation? There's always hope in Vaughan's dark world.

The most macabre of all three stories is *Dead Teenagers*, in which a female minister (played by Caroline Gillis with heart-stopping intensity) reaches a state of exultation at the sight of funerals for children. She can't understand why her presence in one of the hardest mo-



Kirsten Johnson in *The Monster Trilogy*: a mesmerizing performance.

ments in a parent's life will not be welcome. It's an erotic fixation that Vaughan is at pains (by casting a woman in a role originally written with a male performer in mind) to distance from the associations between priests and pedophilia in the general imagination.

Throughout the evening it was impossible not to fully compre-

hend Vaughan's sympathy for these women alongside his unsentimental view of their actions. The idea is not to absolve these women of their sins or troublesome thoughts, but to present them as part and parcel of human nature at this point of time. It's a more sensible way of understanding violence and transgressions than the moral panics we

periodically go through every time a child is murdered or a gun is shot in the bad part of town. There's something to learn from these monsters. Let's listen.

*The Monster Trilogy* continues at Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre until Oct. 9 (416-975-8555).