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## THEATER REVIEW

# Powerful Performance In 'Diary of a Madman'



By LEAH D. FRANK

**A** SHORT but intense adaptation by John Montealeone of Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" is at the Dowling College Arts Center in Oakdale through May 23.

The powerful solo performance piece chronicles the slow downward slide of a man from a position of clerk in an indifferent government bureaucracy to his final frantic hours as an inmate in an insane asylum. Mr. Montealeone is not only the script's architect, but also plays the title role, and as such he brings to life Gogol's penniless middle-age civil servant, and also all contemporary men drowning in hopelessness and despair.

The play takes place on a raised platform set in the center of a large area that represents the small rectangular floor of a room. The space is sparsely furnished with a tiny writing table, a wood chair and a narrow mattress and a bedspring.

At times, the nondescript room serves as the man's bleak boarding-house lodging, his office, his manager's study or his cold asylum cell. No matter what its use, however, the room seems like a giant abstract leg-hold trap from which the only escape is self-mutilation or death.

It is clear from the beginning that the diarist is odd. He has a nervous manner, and he wraps his arms around himself as though he was protecting his body from expected blows. He rocks back and forth on his heels. His pants are too large and ride up too high on his waist, and his shoes are scuffed and unpolished. With his black curly hair, his small round wire-frame glasses and his shadow of a beard, he has the stunned look of a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding car.

The madman confides to the anonymous reader of the diary that he has been seeing and hearing things no one has before. For example, he describes in the most rational manner his obsession with his boss's daughter and how the intensity of this feeling has led him to steal the letters her dog has written to a neighbor's dog. It was through the canine letters, he explains, that he discovered more about the young woman.

As his delusions become increasingly bizarre, and as his behavior appears more and more out of sync with the rest of his neighbors and co-workers, the madman seems to gain an element of dignity out of his delusions.

From being a paper pusher in a large bureaucracy, he turns himself into the King of Spain. When he places his chair on his head as a crown, Mr. Montealeone musters a believable and tragic regal bearing for the impoverished, sick and lonely man. What is created is a lunatic in an insane world whose last hope at achieving worth as a human being is through madness.

Under Keith T. Fadelici's expert direction, "The Diary of a Madman" takes on a dramatic flow in which the



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tension builds inexorably toward the climax. Even as you realize the inevitability of the ending, Mr. Fadelici manages to keep alive the possibility that somehow a miracle will occur and that the imbalance between the sane and the insane will be righted.

Mr. Montealeone meets the almost impossible task of portraying a demented man who is sinking into the quagmire of hopeless melancholia by finding out elements of humor that fit like pegs between layers of tragedy.

There is no time when Mr. Montealeone steps across the boundary between performance integrity and excess. He never yields to the temptation to make fun of the character's range of disorders.

When the character relates, for example, how he can hear the two dogs talking, Mr. Montealeone does so in a natural manner, as though it were the most normal of daily occurrences.

The effect is to create an empathy with the audience, so that when the battered, defeated madman reaches up from his bed and quietly says, "Mother, take pity on a sick child," the sentence sums up the human struggle, not just the life of one man.

Tamar Cohn is responsible for the set design, in which a simple floor and a few pieces of furniture make a statement about various kinds of human prisons. She is also credited with the costumes and lighting design, which together create a sense of unease, as though one might expect to leave the theater only to enter the twilight zone.

"The Diary of a Madman" may be effective theater, but it is too short for a full evening. There is so much talent in evidence that the next time around, perhaps this particular creative team might find a companion piece to fit with "Diary," or whatever else it chooses.