

The Diary of a Man's Mad, Mad World

THE DIARY OF A MADMAN. Adapted for the stage and performed by John Monteleone from the short-story by Nikolai Gogol. A one-man play directed by Keith T. Fadelici with set, costume and lighting by Tamar Cohn. Tonight, tomorrow and next Friday and Saturday at the Performing Arts Center of Dowling College, Idle Hour Boulevard, Oakdale. Also June 30-July 2 at Theater Row Theater, 424 W. 42nd St., Manhattan. Seen on opening night, last Friday.

By Steve Parks

STAFF WRITER

FUNNY, HE doesn't act like a madman. Not at first, he doesn't. A nerd, yes. A guy who's paralyzingly shy around women, sure. But a madman? The world would be a dangerous place if every guy who couldn't get a date was driven insane by his social deprivation.

But wait. The world *is* a dangerous place. And maybe part of the reason it's dangerous is that we don't recognize a madman until he's gone completely bonkers. On the 11 o'clock news, after some guy has blown away 20 people at a diner where a waitress turned him down for a date, neighbors always describe the assailant the same way: He was a quiet fellow, always kept to himself.

The nameless, buried-by-bureaucracy clerk in "The Diary of a Madman" is just such a fellow, except that he's nonviolent — so far. He's got a dead-end job and a hopeless crush on the boss' daughter. Nikolai Gogol's story of descent into madness has been adapted insightfully by John Monteleone, who also performs the solo role with the casual intensity of a man who doesn't realize his own fury.

In this lean production at Dowling College, the madman's scribbles are transformed into a video diary for the stage. Snippets of the clerk's written entries are projected between scenes, providing a cryptic chronology to the progress of his madness.

We meet the clerk on the job, at a corner desk about the size of a nightstand. His wire-rimmed glasses and buttoned-to-the-neck shirt tell us instantly that he's a social cripple. So we're not surprised when he trips headlong over his own desk as he retrieves a hanky that Sophie, the boss' daughter, has dropped.

This is slapstick, so it's OK to laugh. Later the humor is darker and the laughter is muffled by guilt.

It is funny when the clerk reads aloud letters he imagines are written by Sophie's pet dog. He has stolen the letters in hopes of discerning the girl's impression of him. He's

devastated when he reads: "Sophie can barely contain her laughter whenever she sees him."

"Filthy lying bitch!" he shouts. Although we can't be sure whether he's referring here to the dog or the daughter, the revelation that Sophie finds him ridiculous accelerates his descent into madness. Soon despair over his powerlessness overwhelms him. He compensates by imagining he's the king of Spain, answering only to the name Ferdinand.

Monteleone keeps faith with the Gogol story, testing the conscience of his audience. The sicker his madman becomes, the funnier his lines. And laughing at him becomes a little sick, too.

But it can't be helped. Monteleone is both funny and pathetic as the madman. Keith Fadelici's direction is active: There's a lot going on here for a one-man show. Tamar Cohn's spare set — a desk, chair and bed evoking a life in solitary — is rearranged constantly.

On opening night, the diary entries projected on the brick wall behind the set were seen only fleetingly. Early on, these handwritten notes merely tell the date of the entry you're about to witness. But later, these postmarks of the madman's state of mind flash by too quickly to be read. A pity. It's fun to puzzle about their meaning. / ■■

