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One Flea Spare

Naomi Wallace's New York debut play, *One Flea Spare* takes place during the great London Plague of 1665. It is an onion skin sort of play. Director Ron Daniel effectively supervises the removal of layer after layer of revelation from the characters inhabiting the beautifully lit painterly stage set rendered by Riccardo Hernandez, and the original music by Michael Rasbury adds a nice Brechtian touch..

The owners and only residents of the the home are an upper class merchant Mr. William Snelgrave (Jon de Vries) and his wife, Mrs. Darcy Snelgrave (Diane Wiest) are about to be released from a month-long quarantine period, apparently imposed when their servants succumbed to the dread disease. The Snelgraves are imprisoned once again when two unexpected and unwelcome visitors burst into their lives. The two invaders are Bunce, a sailor (Bill Camp) and Morse (Mischa Barton) a somewhat surreal, all-knowing 12-year-old girl who claims to be the child of their now dead aristocratic neighbor. They prove to be volatile additions to a household already diseased with festering sores of anger and frustration, lust and pain. With Miss Wallace, an in-your-face political playwright, calling the shots the dysfunctional Snelgraves' and their fellow prisoners are, of



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course, symbols of the Nature-induced breakdown of the class system outside the house. A fourth player in this dysfunctional house of unlikely companions is a predatory guard, Kabe (Paul Kandel) who keeps gleeful watch on them and offers favors such as oranges and apples as an inducement to satisfy his own slimy taste for child pornography.

This is not the stuff of light entertainment. Even the pristine set shows signs of the smarmy, creeping things destroying body, mind and society. Ms. Wallace knows how to set up a highly charged theatrical situation. What she doesn't know how to do, alas, is to let her political agenda grow organically from fully fleshed-out human beings, instead of the other way around. She controls her dramatic format so tightly, that the characters seem trapped in the formal dance she has choreographed for them. Dianne Wiest succeeds most often in freeing herself from the confines of this stylistic corset. Bill Camp also has his share of genuineness and Mischa Barton is at once charming and eerie as the young girl who, despite having lived through some unspeakable horrors, seems to have the resilience for survival. On the whole, however, though we are in a situation fraught with theatricality and relevance to the social themes explored, we are never fully caught up in the human drama that makes for a strongly felt, memorable experience. Because of this lack, the young girl as a symbol of hope will, for many members of the audience, be eclipsed by the gloomier aspects of the play.

One Flea Spare was previously performed in London (1995) and at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville (1996).

One Flea Spare
Playwright: Naomi Wallace

Director: Ron Daniels

Cast: Mischa Barton/ Morse, Bill Camp/ Bunce, Jon De Vries/ Mr William Snelgrave, Paul Kandel/ Kabe, Dianne Wiest/ Mrs Darcy Snelgrave

Sets: Riccardo Hernandez

Costumes: Paul Tazewell

Lighting: Scott Zielinski

Sound: Stuart J. Allyn

Original Music: Michael Rasbury

Joseph Papp Public Theater/Martinson Hall, 420 Lafayette St.

2/25/97 to 3/29/97

Reviewed by Elyse Sommer

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