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THEATRE REVIEW

Review: The Runner will leave you breathless at Theatre Passe Muraille

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- Title: The Runner
- Written by: Christopher Morris
- Genre: Thriller
- Director: Daniel Brooks
- Actors: Gord Rand
- Company: Human Cargo with the support of Theatre Passe Muraille
- Venue: Theatre Passe Muraille
- City: Toronto
- Year: Runs to Dec. 9, 2018

The Runner, an intense and visceral new thriller now on at Theatre Passe Muraille, will make your heart rate soar and leave you breathless.

In this new play by Christopher Morris, Shaw and Stratford Festival alum Gord Rand gives an urgent performance as Jacob, an Orthodox-Jewish man who works with a volunteer emergency response group in Israel.

Z.A.K.A., as Jacob's group is called, is often first on the scene after a terrorist attack – and part of their job involves the grisly work of collecting blood and body parts to ensure victims can be buried according to Jewish law.

What might be a somewhat meandering monologue in a traditionally staged production is like a shot of adrenaline in this unique one. It is staged by director Daniel Brooks with designer Gillian Gallow, with the highlight being a long and narrow treadmill.

This custom-built, black treadmill stretches from the back wall of the theatre to just a few feet away from the audience – and seems to hover a couple of feet above the ground.

Rand is in almost constant motion on it throughout the play – and as each scene climaxes, the actor increases his speed from a walk to a run to a full-on sprint, all while continuing to deliver his lines.

Every time Jacob hesitated or stopped and was pulled back violently by the treadmill, I gasped. But no matter what trauma is thrown at this character, he keeps getting back up and starts walking again. A moving visual metaphor, in all senses of the word.

The Runner begins with Jacob uncertain where he is – or even who he is. He seems in shock and repeats, “What’s happening, what’s happening, what’s happening?”

That type of short, staccato writing can be deadly on the stage, but Rand delivers it all in a deeply connected way, his physical exertions leading to a natural short-windedness. His panic seeps into the audience.

As Jacob tries to figure out what’s going on, he runs through the past couple of weeks in his mind. He traces his current state of anxiety back to a day when he saved the life of a young Arab teenage girl who had been shot in the back. She was running away from the spot where an Israeli soldier had been stabbed with a knife.

Jacob’s split-second decision to treat the young woman instead of the soldier she may have attacked, who subsequently dies, has repercussions for him with his fellow Z.A.K.A. members. It also leads to confrontations with his mother and his brother – and ends up informing a three-day trip he takes to Ukraine to unearth a mass Jewish grave discovered by a property developer there.

Plays about Israel can be deeply political, but Morris seems more interested in considering universal issues of compassion in a murky moral environment.

The playwright is very detailed in his setting, however, which moves from Jerusalem to an Israeli settlement on the edge of Ramallah and then to Tel Aviv.

This is in interesting contrast to the nebulous stage world created by Brooks, who seems inspired by his past work on the plays of Samuel Beckett, particularly in his collaboration with lighting designer Bonnie Beecher.

The spotlights that illuminate Rand on different parts of the long treadmill almost develop personalities of their own – especially one that comes in from the side like an interrogator, recalling some of Beckett’s short plays. (The hum of the treadmill itself, which accelerates into a kind of scream, is another character created by the design.)

Jacob has plenty of secrets, and, in his incredible performance, Rand paints an unforgettable picture of a man who believes he’s doing the right thing for the right reasons. But no one can run from his secrets forever.

There are elements of The Runner that made me think of the physical performance art of Matthew Barney, and others of the snazzy staging of musicals by Des McAnuff.

But ultimately, this production – from Morris’s Human Cargo theatre company, supported by Theatre Passe Muraille – uses a common technology like I’ve never seen it used before, and in a way that elevates and perfectly integrates with the text. Perhaps a rare occasion where it’s not a cliché to write: Run, don’t walk.

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