

Dear Brutal

J.M. Barrie gets his due in Westport; R.W. Fassbinder is misconstrued at Yale's Summer Cabaret.

By Christopher Arnott

Last year's feel-good literary flick *Finding Neverland* did a real disservice to J.M. Barrie. The out-of-touch child-man portrayed by Johnny Depp could not have written such deeply felt social dramas of class and conflict as *The Admirable Crichton*, *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, or even—despite its profound fantasy elements—*Dear Brutus*, which is getting an exquisite revival at Westport Country Playhouse.

In this stylistically old-world yet still strikingly potent melodrama, a set of set-in-their-ways modern folk stray from a weekend getaway, get lost in a transformative mist, and are thrust into alternate

As an awkward prelude to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Preparadise, Sorry Now*, now being exasperatingly mishandled at the Summer Cabaret at Yale, artistic director Kristin Mendicino personally visits each person in the audience to explain that the show they are about to see is vividly graphic in its depiction of sex and violence. This is a ludicrous exercise for two reasons: First, such one-on-one warnings come off as crass sensationalism, not sincere concern; and second, the Cabaret ensemble is kidding itself if they think what they've wrought here is even remotely realistic or frightening.



PROMOTIONAL PHOTO

Preparadise, Sorry Now: A sorry self-parody.

existences. The reliability of human nature is plumbed: A man who cheats on his wife cheats with the same woman in dreamland; those with hang-ups about status or conformity get comforts they crave, but can't change their stripes. It takes its dream theater from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its title from *Julius Caesar* ("The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars but in ourselves"), but the play's filter is the world of 1917, freshly Freudianized and walloped by the War to End All Wars. Beautifully articulated queries into the human condition abound, such as, for example, "At what age are we nicest?"

Director Gregory Boyd, who brought similarly masterful mood swings to Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* at the Long Wharf this past spring, keeps the piece purposefully stagey, with a lushness that acts as subtext for these characters' brash, mannered exteriors. Only the youngest member of the seasoned 11-person ensemble, Corinne Chandler, as a darling daughter who only exists in the play's wooded dreamscape, misses the playful tone; she comes off stiff and cloying. But no one person's foibles can rend this endearing, enlightening universe asunder.

This sorry production reeks of artifice: silly stage fighting, atrocious British accents, shadow-screen depictions of physical and sexual abuse, and drawn-on swastika tattoos that get unconvincingly smudged away by fresh-off-the-rack bondage gear. This dull and dopey shock-theater misfire is in fact much less disturbing than the last two SumCab shows, in which the pace and abstractness could be honestly distressing and disorienting.

The writings of the prolific, meteoric Fassbinder are concise, radical, raucous and pointedly perverse, with a sensual seediness all their own. In the right unwashed hands, *Preparadise, Sorry Now* can be a scream of undistilled outrage at how politics and culture inevitably fall into crassness and chaos. Through preening self-importance, Cabaret's bloated, boring and distant assemblage of overblown pseudo-porn postures emasculates the play's intent. Don't blame Fassbinder—and don't believe the pre-show hype.