

## Plague drama has power to 'Spare'

By Jenna Scherer / Theater Review | Tuesday, February 9, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Arts & Culture

The egalitarianism of the human body is Naomi Wallace's creepy, compelling topic of choice in "One Flea Spare." Dark and heady, Wallace's 1995 play about life during the Black Death is not one to be trifled with. Lucky for us the members of fringe troupe Whistler in the Dark aren't trifling types.

In 1665 London, life was cheap and dying cheaper. And whether you were rich or poor, disease was the great equalizer.

Though most of the wealthy have already fled the city for less infected climes, Lord Snelgrave (Jeff Gill) and his wife, Darcy (Lorna Nogueira), have been confined to their house by quarantine. They're guarded by working-class lout Kabe (Ben Chase), who gives them another 28 days of house arrest when two desperate interlopers turn up. One is Bunce (Curt Klump), a poor sailor of surprising charisma; the other is Morse (Jen O'Connor), a half-mad girl claiming to be the last survivor of a plague-ravaged aristocratic family.

As in any good elevator play, head games and power grabs ensue as the trapped foursome break one social taboo after another. Class lines blur, promiscuity reigns, and dark secrets are forced into the light. As Morse notes in her chilling opening monologue, delivered with her ruined dress pulled over her face, not everyone makes it out alive.

Wallace's chief concern is the body: the ways it can be hidden or displayed, wounded or healed; the ways it can save us or betray us. This makes sense in a city filled with more dead people than living, their corpses marked with the black lesions of the plague. If her characters are sometimes too smart and self-aware of their own metaphors, it's all in the service of Wallace's theme.

Meg Taintor's production uses the tight confines of the South End's Factory Theatre to maximum dramatic effect. The audience sits on both sides of Emily Woods Hogue's simple set, and the actors often deliver their lines in tense, intimate whispers that could only carry in a space this small. This device brings us unsettlingly close to scenes of seduction or casual sadism, until you get the feeling that just about anything could go down in this little room.

If Whistler in the Dark's production needs anything, it's a dialect coach. But it's easy to forgive this shortcoming in the face of the company's otherwise powerful performances. Though Klump's the worst offender of the bunch accent-wise, his turn as Bunce is mesmerizing. Like the character, he knows just when to play it down and when to go on the attack. Gill is a fanatic and frightening Snelgrave, and Nogueira makes a convincingly broken matriarch. O'Connor's got the crazy-like-a-fox shtick down, and Chase paints a weirdly threatening portrait during his brief scenes.

"One Flea Spare" ropes you in with its premise, then doesn't let you look away when it gets almost too hard to watch. Wallace gives us a self-conscious study in perversity and survival, and Whistler in the Dark makes it all feel true.

*"ONE FLEA SPARE" presented by Whistler in the Dark at the Factory Theatre, Saturday night. Through Feb. 21.*

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