

# Theater Review

## Post-apocalyptic Puppet Show

*Riddley Walker* gets heavy-handed, but still entertains

### Riddley Walker

By Russell Hoban

Pittsburgh Playhouse Repertory Company, Oakland

Through June 9

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Reviewed by Gabriel Davis

The Pittsburgh Playhouse Repertory Company wraps up their season with Russell Hoban's darkly comic *Riddley Walker*, a play with a driving impulse to which my inner-toddler can relate.

As a wee thing I understood well the sterile concept that I would be burned if I touched the hot stove, yet I had this compelling urge to see it happen for myself. The pain which ensued motivated me to dub such untoward impulses as "weird urges," and ignore them from that point forth.

In *Riddley Walker*, three millennia since all of civilization is blown up in a colossal nuclear war, a man named Abel Goodparley is gripped by a colossal "weird urge." Having only the idea of nuclear devastation as passed down for generations, Goodparley wants to see it happen for himself.

Still, he has a long way to go. Since the big blowup, mankind has reverted to a primitive hunter-gatherer existence. Goodparley, born with the stature to intimidate, rules, calling himself the "Pry Mincer." (In 3,000 years the word "prime minister" was bound to get jumbled.)

Goodparley is a massive hypocrite. While seeking the knowledge of mass-destruction for his own aggrandizement, he is simultaneously controlling his people via puppet shows — developed by his nuke-shocked forefathers — which warn against the pitfalls of science and technology.

Meanwhile, a young man named Riddley Walker unwittingly stumbles into information that will help Goodparley make what he believes to be the key to nuclear weaponry. In reality, it's the key to gunpowder, or some such primitive explosive.

Hoban's play is based on his novel of the same title, which won the Australian Science Fiction Achievement Award in 1982 and influenced depictions of the world in films like *Mad Max*. Pay attention to the way the tribe of children in the film speak, and you'll recognize it as the odd vernacular Hoban so skillfully creates. This is our spoken language as it might be after three millennia of backsliding and maleducation.

Fitting is the location Playhouse Rep has chosen for telling this tale. *Riddley Walker* is not

staged in the Playhouse's large theater at street level, but rather in a more claustrophobic basement space — effectively conjuring the feel of a fallout shelter.

Stephanie Mayer's scenic design immediately smacks of Beckett, with a large dirt-mound to one side of the stage and a small pile of sand to the other. Players emerge through holes in the walls and a concrete opening in the floor, clad in Joan Markert's appropriately dirt-encrusted, coarse fabrics.

The large cast is spirited and intense, but at times so loudly frenetic in such a small playing space as to be grating. Still, solid ensemble work is done as hunter-gatherers during the singing of a catchy song about Riddley Walker — no, this isn't a musical — as well as scenes with a pack of killer canines and a creepy, crawly mob of tortured souls.

Michael Tornetta as Riddley Walker is rakish and irreverent at the top of the play, aggressively pushing his youthful energy into the audience. At times I wanted to slink back a few rows. During the puppet shows, however, this energy engages. Tornetta produces a hilarious voice for his scientist puppet.

Peter Uribe's Abel Goodparley is deliciously dark. A searing presence, he stares out at his world with a piercing and edgy — but secretly bewildered — gaze. His hunger for knowledge is both genuine and amusing. In one scene he reads an ancient 20th-century document, trying to decode what he is sure must be a hidden message about how to make nukes. Under his brilliant scrutiny the word "crucifying" becomes "cruci-frying," meaning to heat in a crucible.

However, it is not until John Gresh comes along as Granser, the man with the forbidden knowledge Goodparley seeks, that one is fully brought into the world of the play. Gresh is refreshingly unaffected and one of the few low-key players in the ensemble, speaking Hoban's odd version of English as if it were his daily parlance.

Finally, director Rick Kemp waxes overly symbolic, placing the performance of the puppet show upon the grave of ages past. However, he also creates a wonderful image for Riddley's deep attunement to nature, hoisting him by a pulley skyward as he runs with a pack of wild dogs, literally on air.

In sum, there are bright spots in the evening, and Hoban's unique vernacular certainly fascinates, but at two and a half hours, the simple storyline is stretched too thin. What's left is scene after scene of heavy symbolism and allegory, overzealous acting and, with the preachy puppet shows, an oddly incongruous Mr. Rogers-esque didacticism.