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Puppets and The Pillowman

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The first command uttered by director Tara Lee Downs at a rehearsal last week for “The Pillowman” set the tone for a production that’s more than a little unconventional. “I think we should do a puppet fight call,” Downs said at the start of the rehearsal by The Saints & Poets Production Company.

“How often do you hear that?” co-producer Jess Wilson asked, half to Downs and half to herself.

Brawling puppets aren’t called for in most plays, and they’re not inherently a part of the dark comedy by playwright Martin McDonagh, but puppets are the main event for The Saints & Poets Production Company. “The Pillowman,” which opens tonight at the Main Street Landing Black Box Theatre, is the third production by Saints & Poets, following last fall’s “The Rocky Horror Show” and the spring presentation of “Charlotte’s Web.” All have had puppets on stage, but “The Pillowman” might be the least likely to feature props normally thought of as cute and friendly. McDonagh’s play centers on police in a totalitarian state grilling a writer whose work about grisly child deaths seems to presage a rash of similar killings.

“The Pillowman” poses exactly the kind of challenge The Saints & Poets Production Company is looking for, according to Burlington actor Seth Jarvis, a member of the part-puppet, part-Homo-sapiens cast.

“They’re very interested in finding pieces and projects like ‘The Pillowman’ where you don’t necessarily think, ‘Oh, puppets,’” said Jarvis, who stars as Katurian, the writer subjected to an especially brutal interrogation at the hands of detectives Tupolski (played by G. Richard Ames) and Ariel (Andrew Butterfield). “Once you think about it, it’s a pretty brilliant idea.”

The presence of puppets in the company has a lot to do with co-producer Kevin Christopher, who studied puppetry at West Virginia University. He and Jarvis were in a Shelburne Players production of Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing” and talked about their mutual admiration for the 2008 hit-men-on-the-run film “In Bruges,” which earned McDonagh an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay. That led to a discussion of the writer’s plays — including “The Cripple of Inishmaan,” which Jarvis starred in six years ago at Champlain College — and how “The Pillowman” might be a good fit for Saints & Poets and its inclination toward puppetry.

“He tells a great story, and that’s always paramount,” Jarvis said of McDonagh. “He is provocative and challenging in the best senses of those words.”

Jarvis said “The Pillowman” has a fairy-tale quality yet, much like those dark Black Forest stories from our youth, also possesses a twisted, dangerous spirit. “It taps into a tradition of childhood fantasy and something safe,” he said.

Christopher said puppets seem to give a production like “The Pillowman” a lighter, more accessible feel. “At the same time,” he said, “puppets take it further than it would have gone otherwise.”

The rehearsal last week at the studios of CCTV in the Old North End of Burlington gave a glimpse into what Christopher was talking about. Jarvis’ character narrated one of Katurian’s stories in which a pigtail-wearing girl portrayed by a puppet imagined she was Jesus, complete with a fake beard and white robe. She suffered much like Jesus at the hands and fists of her sadistic foster parents, also portrayed by puppets whose treatment of the little girl was a slow-motion choreography of violence. The fact that the poor victim is portrayed by a puppet lets the nasty acts of the foster parents to transpire on a hunk of cloth rather than a live girl, while allowing the frightening imagination of Katurian’s writing to come out more vividly.

The puppeteers all wear black so they can blend into the background of the stage set. Christopher said he opted for “table-top puppetry” rather than hand puppets or marionettes, which means the puppeteers can use the puppets’ arms and legs in a realistic fashion. “This allows the puppets to be a little more humanoid,” Christopher said.

Downs has directed a pair of gritty Burlington productions in recent years, “American Buffalo” and “Orphans,” but has never overseen a play involving puppets. She said a play with puppets adds another layer to a director’s skill set; instead of simply asking an actor to do this or that, she has to ask puppeteers to do something which in turn makes the puppets do what Downs wants them to do.

“It’s been a real treat for me,” Downs said during a break in rehearsals.

But she also has enough live actors to work with in “The Pillowman” to put her in her comfort zone. McDonagh, much like “American Buffalo” playwright David Mamet, puts his plays and his characters in particularly harsh settings.

“I’m known for working with men and dark material and a lot of swearing,” Downs said.