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Musical about domestic violence premieres in Tokyo

By Yukiko Kishinami
Japan News Staff Writer

The world premiere of the new musical “Disturbance,” which depicts a case of domestic violence that leads to murder, was held in Tokyo on July 2-4.

Based on a true story and adapted from a book of poetry of the same title by Ivy Alvarez, the production starts peacefully with the sound of birds singing, and a nursery song-like canon about a family of four: daughter Hannah, her younger brother Tom and their parents Tony and Jane. A picture of the family, projected on a screen, then shatters, and the audience learns that something terrible has happened.

The following scenes reveal the situation — Tony fatally shot Tom and Jane before killing himself — bit by bit, through the words of emergency service operators, Tony’s parents, journalists, police detectives, neighbors, the local priest and even Tony’s mistress, and show what they could have done for the family.

The members of the family don’t reappear until after halfway through the show, when Hannah, the sole survivor, comes onstage to make her statement, only to be discouraged by the flashes and clicking shutters of reporters’ cameras. Only after that does the audience find out what the family members were thinking: how Tony was violent toward his wife and children, that Jane was intimidated by him and discussing divorce, and how Tony, who was a deeply troubled man, prepared the weapon.

The 90-minute show, which has no intermission, is filled with a variety of emotions. It’s so tense throughout that a light-hearted scene with estate agents toward the end came as a relief when I saw the performance on July 3.

The production was skillfully directed by Rachel Walzer, who also was responsible for the difficult task of adapting the poems into a script. The music was written by Australia-based composer Mark Ferris, who won a Tony Award last year as a coproducer of a revival production of “Once On This Island” on Broadway. He’s provided various styles of music, from jazz to choral music. There are also many scenes with only spoken dialogue.

Director Walzer and the actors are all based in Japan, many of them working with the Tokyo International Players. Their singing abilities varied somewhat, yet they made a beautiful ensemble singing together. Shayna Magnuson stood out as Hannah, particularly in her heartfelt singing of the final solo — the most powerful song in the



Photo by Kelly Haavaldsrud

Jane (Tania Coke) is pinned by Tony (Evan Spreen) in “Disturbance.”

show — in which the girl expresses her helplessness as a survivor of domestic violence.

The venue, Musicasa in Tokyo’s Shibuya Ward, is an intimate environment with 85 seats. The stage has three levels and a circular staircase in the middle, which was effectively used for entries and other action on stage. A screen on the right-hand side rose to reveal an electric piano behind it and came down to show the title of each scene as well as family photos and other visuals to help convey the story.

I liked the economy and efficiency of how some of the actors took turns playing the electric piano while also singing.

Toward the end, contacts for support groups for sufferers of domestic violence, such as non-profit organization Resilience (www.resilience.jp), are shown onscreen, reminding us that similar cases can happen anywhere in the world. Kudos to everyone involved for courageously staging a production about a difficult subject that is both very private and very public.

Alvarez came to Japan for the first time to see the premiere, traveling all the way from Auckland. According to Ferris, the production team is approaching theater companies in the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand about possible further performances.

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