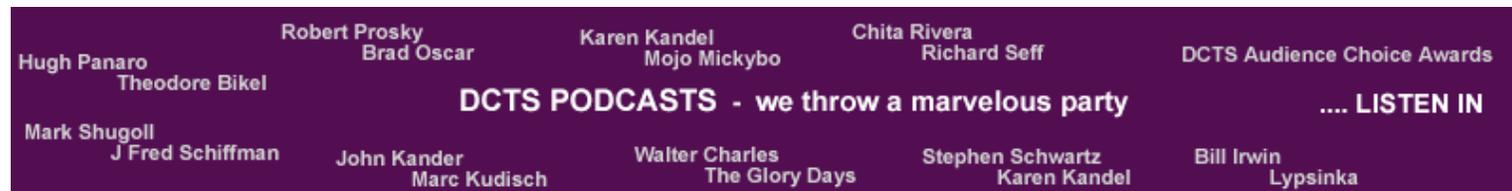


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[The Plague](#)

⊆ April 18th, 2008 by [Steven McKnight](#) | ~



Michael Vitaly Sazonov and ensemble members (Photo: Ian C. Armstrong)

The Plague

By Albert Camus . Adapted for the stage by Otho Eskin
Directed by Robert McNamara and Ellen Wilhite
Produced by [Scena Theatre](#)
Reviewed by Steven McKnight

Dramatizing a novel is difficult, even more so when that novel, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, serves primarily as a platform for discussing philosophical responses to the absurdity of the human condition in an arduous situation. Yet the cast of Scena Theatre's production makes a game effort that leavens the discourses with enough convincing drama to make *The Plague* an intelligent and memorable piece of theatre.

The Plague is set in Oran, Algeria, a city struck by plague multiple times in its history. As thousands of rats start dying, city officials gather them quickly to prevent any public panic. Unfortunately, their very act of burning the rats only serves to further the spread of an airborne infection. Soon increasing numbers of the populace start dying.

Authorities are slow to act even as the main protagonist, Dr. Rieux (Michael Vitaly Sazonov), insists that something must be done after his friend Michel dies. Both the bureaucracy and the populace at large don't want to admit the existence of the plague because it would require action and it would destroy the future and their hopes. In time, however, ever stricter measures are required, leading eventually to the quarantine of the entire city.

Many of the characters respond to the plague in keeping with their characters. Dr. Rieux and his colleague Dr. Castel (Honora Talbott) work to treat the ill and develop a serum. The oily town Prefect (Ian Blackwell Rogers) tries to maintain order, and the town magistrate Monsieur Othon (Kim Curtis) follows the law without question even when it means quarantine for himself and his son.

Some of the more interesting aspects of the play involve the characters whose responses to the plague either seem surprising or gradually evolve. In the former category are a visitor, Tarrou (C. Travis Atkinson), who takes on dangerous volunteer work despite a lack of connection to the town, and Cottard, a rogue who accepts the risks of the plague and the opportunities for female coupling while enjoying the fact that authorities are too busy to investigate his former criminal acts.

Among the characters who evolve as the plague wears on are Rambert, a visiting journalist who first seeks permission and then criminal assistance in an effort to escape the city to rejoin his love in Paris. Regen Wilson gives a standout performance as the good heartedly cynical man who becomes increasingly desperate before changing his attitude. Another interesting change comes from Father Paneloux (Buck O'Leary), who initially views the plague as a deserved message from God before finding that the suffering of an innocent child raises difficult questions for his faith.

A larger character in the work is the city's populace itself as it responds to the situation. *The Plague* is considered an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France. This concept makes it even more poignant when the people first try to live their normal lives but find it increasingly difficult as the situation worsens and the central authority clamps down with rationing and other authoritarian measures.

To explain both the progression of the plague and the city's response, a large amount of exposition is required. The resulting dramatic problems are ameliorated by the use of shifting narrators, the most powerful of which is the authoritative voice of Mr. Atkinson as Tarrou. The fact that all of the narrators have a definite point of view as they help the audience through this streamlined story is also beneficial.

Directors Elle Wilhite and Robert McNamara demonstrate considerable thought in their effective staging of the challenging work. From the moment the audience enters, greeted by a quarantine worker in a gas mask to sit near a stage surrounding by sand, dead rats, and body parts, nearly every detail is successful. The use of large clear cases on rollers is an especially effective technique that conveys the sense of quarantine and highlights the citizens who occupy those cases periodically. Kimberly Dawn Morell comes up with a very convincing World War II era costume design, especially with the ladies' dresses. The occasional sound touches are effective, ranging from church bells to some café music that mockingly evokes the normal atmosphere the desperate citizens try to maintain.

Scena Theatre has assembled a large cast (14 actors, some doubling) to handle this big work. Many of the best performances come from actors with relatively small parts, including Joe Lewis as Joseph Grand, whose response to the plague is a desperate attempt to develop a perfect first sentence for his novel. Three ladies (Samantha Merrick, Carolyn Myers, and Karen O'Connell) form an effective ensemble that boosts the energy and entertainment value with every appearance.

The Plague may not be everyone's cup of tea. If you ever enjoyed a college philosophy class, however, you will find it a thought-provoking outing.

- **Running Time:** 1:30 (no intermission)
- **Where:** Warehouse Theater, 1021 7th Street N.W., Washington, DC.
- **When:** Through May 11. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.
- **Tickets:** \$25 - \$30.
- **Info:** Call 703-683-2824 or visit the [website](#).

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