

## Theater in Delaware: 'Way to Heaven' is repertory at its best

Resident Ensemble Players depict evil of Holocaust in moving, spiritual drama

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Written by  
**BODEN DAY**  
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### THEATER REVIEW

**WHAT:** "Way to Heaven (Himmelweg)" by Juan Mayorga, translated by David Johnston.

**WHEN:** Today, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.; Saturday, May 7, at 2 p.m.; Tuesday, May 10, Wednesday, May 11, and Saturday, May 14, all at 7:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Hartshorn Theatre, University of Delaware, Academy Street and East Park Place, Newark.

**INFORMATION:** 831-2204 or [www.rep.udel.edu](http://www.rep.udel.edu)

The Resident Ensemble Players' production of Juan Mayorga's "Way to Heaven" is gripping, yes. It is flawless, yes. But it is something much more. It is spiritual. It grabs us and moves us in that quiet, deepest part of our being.

This careful production is simply professional repertory theater at its most excellent.

Mayorga's inspiration for this multilayered drama, eloquent in its 90-minute spareness, was events at the Theresienstadt Jewish "resettlement" camp in what is now the Czech Republic.

There, the Nazis created a deranged Potemkin village to dispel extermination rumors and mollify the Danish and International Red Cross, who visited the sham "community" on June 23, 1944.

As in this play, visitors saw fabricated, well-rehearsed tableaux of bucolic, mundane situations in a contrived "Stepford Wives" vision of everyday domesticity.

The repetitious, mindless language of the Jewish "actors" in these tableaux, as delineated to perfection by the production's young ensemble, would be funny -- if only we could forget the evil lurking behind it.

In reality, Theresienstadt was a concentration camp, a way station leading to Auschwitz and other death camps.

Matthew Earnest is the precise-speaking director and scenic designer of this, his third production of the internationally acclaimed 2003 play.

The serious-minded director and the University of Delaware's Resident Ensemble Players have made myriad smart choices. There's the lighting: piercing cold white, then ominous flashlights, then unworldly warm box-shaped lights on the dead leaves covering a somehow menacing floor.

Earnest says this is "not another Holocaust play." He challenges us to "not just naively take on the trope of crazy Germans and the poor Jews."

To this end, he's chosen an amazing cast, beginning with the mesmerizing Mic Matarrese as the concentration camp's sinister, unctuous Nazi commandant. There's the slight, almost unseen flicking of dust from his uniform jacket as he avers, "People think we're animals. But look at my library."

Matarrese does not play this character; he completely inhabits it.

Matthew Simpson vividly conveys a rueful Red Cross commissioner and Andy Nagraj, as the fake mayor of the "village," meets the challenge of (mostly) visually reacting -- or not -- to the Shakespeare and Spinoza-spewing commandant's unimpeded self-congratulatory narcissism.

All is not harshness in this David Johnston translation. There is the beautifully soft, sweet moment between Nagraj and little red-headed Rebecca, played with an entrancing innocence by seventh-grader Olivia Quinci.

"Way to Heaven," the caboose of an unprecedented 10-play REP season, reminds us of Hannah Arendt's warning about the

"banality of evil." It's also a clarion call to, in the words of one of the Founding Fathers, Thomas Paine, look behind the throne of power.