

Zeitgeist's 'Punk Rock' — Shades Of Newtown And The Marathon



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- Written By Ed Siegel
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BOSTON — What if there was no “why” in the minds of the perpetrators of the Newtown massacre and the Boston bombings. What if the question they, and others like them, ask is “Why not?”

That’s the rather terrifying possibility raised by [Zeitgeist Stage Company’s](#) powerful production of Simon Stephens’ 2009 English play “[Punk Rock](#)” (at the Boston Center for the Arts, through May 25). The setting is Stockport Grammar School near Manchester, where seven students are preparing for A-level exams. Each is bright in his or her own way. Each is lacking in his or her own way, particularly the four boys — the class bully, the class victim, the class charismatic liar, the class Romeo who’s more of a follower.

We have seen variations of these kids before – we probably went to school with them ourselves, which is part of the attraction of Stephens’ strong characterizations. In terms of theater, though, Stephen Karam, Mark Ravenhill, Neil LaBute, and Kenneth Lonergan have all given us first-rate 21st-century plays about anarchic youth, many on the verge of violence (hence, presumably, the title of this play).



Bennett thrashes his classmate, Alex. (Richard Hall/Silverline Images)

The graying of the theater audience hasn't affected the subject matter, at least in this crucial subset of contemporary theater, which isn't afraid to go beyond the media jargon of the day. As we watch these seven students go at each other, physically and mentally, making the occasional connection with each other, we know that someone is going to crack as there are hints dropped like breadcrumbs along the way. A psychological condition here, the bully's violence there, sexual jealousy, the world blowing itself up, violence in the media, a "whatever" attitude by almost everyone. Ethnic violence, particularly by radical Muslims, isn't a part of the "Punk Rock" equation, though England is obviously no less immune than America.

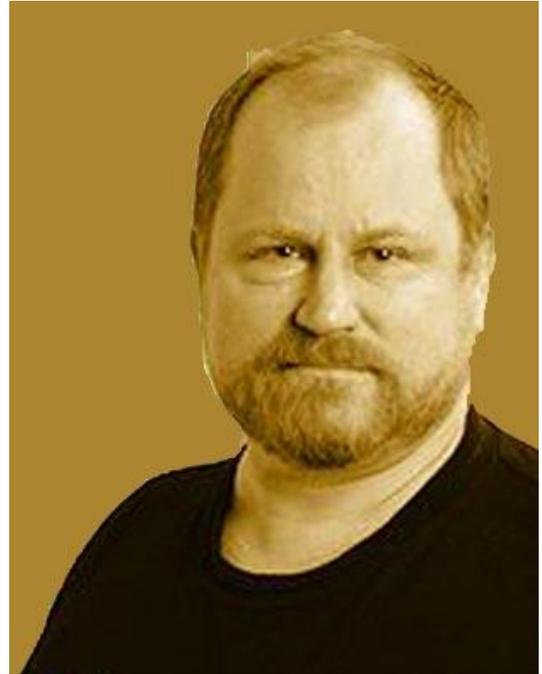
Stephens isn't discounting any of it, though he's obviously suspicious of any easy answers. Or of any single answer. There's something in the zeitgeist and none of the above might be the main culprit.

Zeitgeist? Talk about not settling for easy answers. David Miller and his Zeitgeist Stage Company have been a cutting-edge mainstay in the growth of Boston theater. Not only has he been one of the most daring artistic directors on the local scene in terms of subject matter, but he's also a fine director and set designer, as he shows in "Punk Rock." The study-room desks with the audience on

either side of the small Plaza Black Box Theatre create the same sense of forced intimacy for actors and onlookers alike.

Even more impressive is his ability to put together such an impressive cast of young people, ranging from high school students to recent college graduates. If their British accents aren't faultless they're fully believable and they each bring out the vividness of Stephens' script with such ensemble virtuosity that Miller's hand has to be in there somewhere. This isn't easy material despite, or maybe because of, the familiarity of the subject matter.

There are times in the play when you wonder if Stephens isn't just throwing various forms of disaffection against the wall to see what sticks, but there are a pair of arias, one about the hopelessness of the species destroying the planet and another about causes of violence that are so smartly written and so soulfully delivered that they are all the evidence you need that you're witnessing a very good play— and a very good production.



Zeitgeist Stage Company Artistic Director
David J. Miller