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Review: Grim 'Mad Forest' at 'Berg expertly acted and well-paced

By *Dave Howell*

Most of us do not know much about Romania, but "Mad Forest," which ran Thursday through Saturday at Muhlenberg College, brought it to life. "To life" might not be the right phrase, however. **The Romania of 1989 is a somber, joyless place, as indicated by the black and gray boxes that are the sets in Act I.** The play, written by Caryl Churchill, covers the time right before, during, and after the revolution that overthrew the despotic regime of Nicolae Ceausescu.

There are many scenes in the beginning, some of which are only a few minutes long. They seem a bit random at first, but a pattern soon emerges. The plot centers on the working class Vladu family: Bogdan (Zach Love) and Irina (Lily Fryburg), their daughters Lucia (Kim Rogers) and Florina (Caroline Lux), and their son Gabriel (Jake Haven Parisse). Lucia wants to marry an American and get a passport, which causes problems in the paranoid world created by Ceausescu. Scenes are interspersed showing people doing things like waiting in line for the trolley and buying bread. There are other vignettes about the Antonescu family: architect Mihai (Mark McGillivray), teacher Flavia (Eliana Sagarin), and their son Radu (Alan Mendez).

The atmosphere is like George Orwell's "1984" or Terry Gilliam's "Brazil," but in this case it actually happened. Electricity goes on and off, eggs are a precious commodity, Bogdan is threatened and forced to inform on his acquaintances, and propaganda has replaced information.

There are some fantasy scenes amidst the gritty realism. A priest (Russell Norris) talks with an angel (Holly Cate) that has become comfortable with fascists. And there is a disturbing, but fascinating, encounter between a vampire (Norris) and a talking, starving dog (Cate).

In Act II, following directly from Act I without an intermission, the actors line up at the front of the stage and give eyewitness accounts of the revolution taking place in the streets. These are based on interviews that Churchill did in Romania. One of the most striking moments of the play is a musical battle between the revolutionary anthem "Romania Awake," sung a capella by the eyewitnesses, and a recorded version of the hymn to Ceausescu.

Act III continues the story of the two families after the revolution, as they and others discover that the change in government did not bring an end to paranoia, fear, or ethnic hatred.

There are flashes of humor and gaiety to relieve the grim reality. There are a few slow parts in the two and a half hours, but they seem necessary to portray the grinding hopelessness of life during those years.

This was an expertly acted and well-paced production, directed by Beth Schachter. The story is still relevant in today's world, unfortunately.