

THEATER REVIEW

Murakami's 'Sleep' conjures terror here before BAM run

By David Patrick Stearns
STAFF WRITER

Haruki Murakami's *Sleep*, in a world-premiere staging by New York's Ripe Time theater company, arrived at the Annenberg Center this weekend prior to its run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave festival — and just in time for Halloween.

Murakami's position in the literary world is such that you'd hardly compare his work to, say, *Rosemary's Baby*. Yet this highly theatrical adaptation of his 1994 short story — still a work in progress — ultimately inspired just as much terror at Saturday's matinee as any less-exalted horror show. And that's partly because, contrary to *Rosemary's* saga, there is no spawn of Satan that turns the plot into something we can readily understand.

You stumbled out of the Annenberg Center with no more concrete knowledge than when you walked in, like experiencing a dream that's disturbing for reasons you may never understand. Ignorance equals fear with Murakami, whose writing is so insinuating that you don't realize how disturbing it is until it's deep inside of you.

The play's main character, known only as Woman, is at the mercy of unseen forces that are never explained and that have no

point of reference with any mythology I know of. She has a spell cast upon her by a night specter, one that in this staging is violent, but with seemingly benign after-effects: She has no urge to sleep, and as we meet her on day 17, she acquires an awareness that's strangely superior to the repetitive, mundane world around her.

Toward the end, when barely seen forces become malevolent and attack her in an automobile that stubbornly refuses to start, we still don't know if she's been dreaming, dying, or trapped in some alternate consciousness that we don't know about. But if it can happen to her, it can happen to you — which is where terror sets in.

The production, directed by Rachel Dickstein, is extremely sophisticated — which is part of the allure, with a feast of mood-setting sound from exotic instruments and all manner of lighting effects that make Murakami's strange inner world palpable. The main physical set is a cube that is Woman's circumscribed world — but one that is too big for the Annenberg Center's smallish Harold Prince Theatre, creating impaired sight lines.

The show's arc was haphazard. The previously quiet, contained life of Woman was established only briefly before stylized

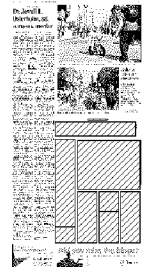
movement set in — sometimes seeming strange and artsy in early scenes. In other words, the show was over-directed, and with an uncertain compass. Domestic episodes were clumsily executed.

As the production went on, though, it was cleaner and more sure of itself, even if odd cameo appearances from Anna Karenina (yes, Tolstoy's character) overstayed their welcome.

One thing that anchored this adaptation at all points was the conviction of the acting. As Woman, Jiehae Park was commanding, confiding, and quietly magnetic in a performance that turned on a dime from incredulity to irony. Substantial support came from Saori Tsukada as her Shadow, who looked like Woman but spoke in a cooler, deeper voice with a more reserved demeanor. Brad Culver was probably too innately charismatic to be the dentist husband whom she's so bored with. But without him, *Sleep* might seem like a one-person show.

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The show, which played here Friday and Saturday, moves to BAM's Next Wave Festival on Nov. 29-Dec. 2.
Information: bam.org.





Haruki Murakami's "Sleep," created by the Brooklyn-based Ripe Time, is from a short story. The cast includes Jiehae Park, Brad Culver, and Takemi Kitamura (on floor). JULIETA CERVANTES