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Creepy 'Clockwork,' In Gear at Studio

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Studio Theatre's Secondstage typically offers young actors, directors and designers a chance to flex their developing muscles, usually by taking a whack at oddball material. Often the results are what you'd expect—even work that has its moments.

Occasionally, though, Secondstage matches up talent and script in a way that suggests a maturity worthy of a seasoned company, and the latest example of this is its production of Anthony Burgess's "A Clockwork Orange," which opened Sunday night.

The show has its rough edges, but its earnest execution and stylized theatricality impressively evoke the unsettling spirit of a complex script.

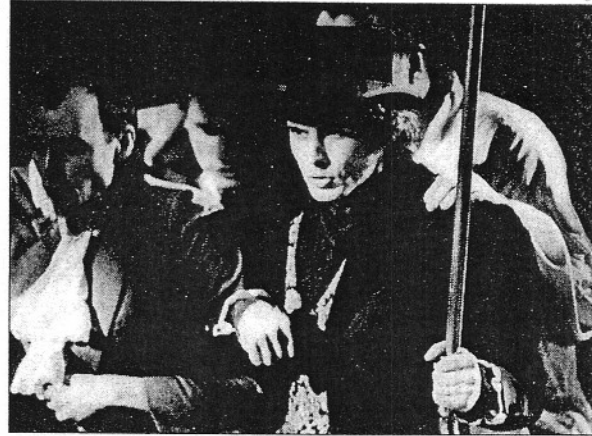
Burgess's slim and slightly infamous 1962 novel mixed sci-fi, sex and violence (mostly sex and violence) into a toxic cautionary tale about the way a dehumanized society turns people into mechanical beings—clockwork oranges—incapable of making moral choices. Set in futuristic London, the story is wittily narrated by Alex, a teenage sociopath who leads a vicious gang, one of many terrorizing the city. Alex and his boys—or "droogs," in the lyrical slang Burgess invented—have a thing for rape, murder and general mayhem, and they're very good at all of it—especially Alex.

Until he's caught after one brutal crime and sent to prison, where he's subjected to an equally brutal form of behavior modification to cure him of his antisocial tendencies. But all this does is make him physically sick at the thought of hurting anyone: His ensuing "goodness" is not the result of any conscious choice, but rather a conditioned response.

Yes, Burgess oversimplified the threat to free will more than just a little, and the ending he tacked on, allowing Alex a chance to make a choice, was hardly convincing. But in making his main point—doing the right thing because you can't do anything else might be worse than doing the wrong thing—Burgess coolly piled up ironies as high as the body count with a minimal amount of moralizing. There's a sense of authorial ambivalence about Alex that made following his story seem both exciting and repellent, and hence fascinating.

Stanley Kubrick's 1971 movie, by contrast, was merely repellent, because it pretentiously conceived Alex as an antihero whose violence was the only moral choice to make against a dehumanized society. Fortunately, Secondstage director Mike Chamberlin has hewed close to the tone of the novel, no doubt partly because Burgess adapted it himself. But Chamberlin's production ultimately captures that ambivalence—no easy feat—and places it at the epicenter of a rumbling evening.

As Alex, Scot McKenzie is full of sinister charisma and a mordant wit that often has you laughing. But then suddenly he really seems to be getting his jollies by torturing or maiming someone. Actors usually try to win audiences over to their characters' side; McKenzie doesn't seem to care. As a result the performance is constantly—and daringly—pulling you in, then pushing you away, but never letting you go.



Scot McKenzie as Alex with his gang of "droogs" in "A Clockwork Orange."

As Pete, Georgie and Dim, Alex's droogs, Andrew Boyle, Patrick Busink and C.L. Hopkins, respectively, have a similar effect. Each amusingly plays up his character's one human quality—the desire to belong to something—then each becomes an animal when a new target of opportunity has the misfortune of wandering by. The rest of the large ensemble, meanwhile, provides mostly steady support in a variety of roles.

Chamberlin's blending of artifice and realism enhances this tension between the humane and the inhumane. Alex and the boys tend to caper about in a sort of choreographed prelude to violence. Those moments become surreal when accompanied by Peter N. Joyce's moody lighting and David McKeever's sound design, which draws heavily on Beethoven as well as some original compositions. But the murders and rapes are played for real. The effect? Jarring, in the right way.

There's really only one false note, and it happens before the show starts, when droogs are out front of the theater, trying to intimidate the audience as it arrives. This isn't just old hat: It simply doesn't work. But once you're inside and the lights go down, you're in for an evening that's disturbingly entertaining.

A Clockwork Orange, by Anthony Burgess, based on his novel. Directed by Mike Chamberlin. Costumes by Kathleen Geldard and LeVonne Lindsay. Through March 4 at Studio Theatre Secondstage. Call 202-332-3300.