The Left Atrium

Playing Noah

Mourning dove

A play by Emil Sher

Directed by Lorne Pardy

Great Canadian Theatre Company, Ottawa

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Emil Sher's *The Mourning Dove*, which premiered at Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company this winter, begins with sound: the sawing of wood, the wheeze of a respirator. A man is recreating Noah's ark, preparing a puppet play for his profoundly disabled daughter. Will she enjoy the show? Can there be any relief for her suffering? The sawing, we soon learn, is a correlative of the imminent and intolerable prospect of a saw on bone: doctors have planned a "salvage operation" on Doug's pain-wracked daughter.

The story is, in essence, the story of Robert Latimer and his daughter Tracy, whose life Mr. Latimer ended in 1993 by means of carbon monoxide poisoning. So familiar is this sad story to Canadians that few who see Sher's play (or who heard it in its earlier incarnation as a radio drama) will arrive without prejudice. But most will expect a re-opening of the case. Theatres bear something in common with courtrooms, for they subject human behaviour to a trial — by the audience, and by a cast of characters.

For Emil Sher, who discussed his script with me recently, there seems to be "very little conflict" to explore in the real Robert Latimer, who, he believes, is "absolutely rock-solid in his beliefs"; hence there is no ambivalence to examine in his choice. Perhaps this helps to explain why Timothy Webber (of *North of 60*) appeared rather aloof from his "Latimer" character; at least, I did not come away with a deeper sense of what his moment of choice *felt* like. Kate Hurman gave the audience more to work with as Sandra, Doug's doggedly upbeat wife, who makes

"Team Tina" T-shirts for friends who have offered to help after the surgery. Sandra is practical, patient, ordinary — until the moment she returns from church to find her euthanized daughter. Sher holds back from moral judgement in this play, but I certainly felt one in the gunshot-loud slamming of a door as Sandra enters to confront her husband. There is no equivocation in this moment.

The ambiguity begins after this apparent point of no return. Doug, waiting for the judgement of society, evades the judgement of his wife in self-exile in his workshop. Sandra, alienated but no deserter, brings him blankets and food. She puts it to him that no one is questioning his motivation — only his choice. He has done what she herself once contemplated. In that choice they are divided. But why *did* she choose differently, Sandra wonders. Out of cowardice? Out of love? Which one of them was Tina's true protector?

As potent as this marital dynamic is, the most interesting dimension of the script is the character of Keith, a intellectually challenged young man who dotes on Tina and is a satellite member of the family. Ben Meuser's portrayal is wonderfully rich and well-studied, from his facial expressions to his mannerisms, speech and gait (a pity that a noisy stage amplified his heavy step to the point of caricature). Keith exhibits an unshakable literal-mindedness, creating humour he does not intend. Although we are charmed and cannot miss the poignancy of his remarks ("Hippo doesn't want to go on the ark. Nobody knows how to speak hippo"), there is an inequality between Keith and Doug, as between

Keith and the audience — at least superficially. Keith's realization that the "crazy talk" surrounding Doug's part in Tina's death is true provokes him to an eloquent anger in which it is plain that he perceives both his limitations and his worth. "I am never going to heal," he shouts. "Are you going to kill me, too?" Thus Keith asserts himself not only as Tina's proxy, but as his own advocate. In the writing, and in the quality of the performance, this character is at the centre of the play.

Ben Meuser as Keith and Timothy Webber as Doug in *Mourning Dove*.

For all that, Keith is not Tina. Tina is a notable absence, represented off-stage by Stephanie Burchell, who creates the sounds of the respirator. The other characters mime their interactions with her, caressing imaginary hair, speaking to an emptiness (until the end, when Tina "appears" as a vacant, accusatory wheelchair). I suspect that the impact and possibilities of this play would have been different had Tina been a bodily presence on stage — if she had not been an abstraction, a cipher, a moral puzzle, but had truly been "there" to challenge us. For the audience, as for Keith, the simple fact of her would leave no room for debate.

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Mourning Dove will be published this summer by Playwrights Canada Press (www.playwrightscanada.com).