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NOVEMBER 9, 2006
The Grey Zone

BY [TED HOOVER](#)

For some it's the microchip; others would say a mushroom cloud. But for me the most evocative, if not representative, image of the 20th century is a German boxcar on a railroad siding. Everything you'd want or need to know about humanity is summed up in that image.

That's the mental baggage I carried into barebones productions' Pittsburgh premiere of Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*, based on the book *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, by Mikos Nyiszli. I left two hours later thinking ... well, pretty much the same thing.

We open in the Number Three Crematorium at Auschwitz in 1944 -- right there you have an idea of the evening's tone -- with a group of Jews whose job it is to steer Jewish prisoners into the gas chambers and then remove and burn their corpses. Everyone who has previously done this job has himself been murdered after four months, and this group is at three and counting ... so they plan a revolt, and *The Grey Zone* is a series of brief scenes leading up to the uprising.

As a playwright, Nelson has the good sense to trust the power of his story and stay out of its way; this is a gruesome tale, tautly told. When the movie version opened, I recall questions about the moral ambiguity of the workers and of Nyiszli (himself working under Josef Mengele), who made deals just to stay alive one day longer. But it's a non-starter: Questioning the morality of Auschwitz prisoners is obscene.

Barebones director Jason Nodler does exactly what he needs to do: The production moves swiftly; the emotional subtext is given voice but never overplayed; and there's a real sense of people living in the event rather than commenting on it.

Bingo O'Malley plays Nyiszli with exhausting,

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Fade to Grey: Bingo O'Malley (left) and Chelsea Mervis star in The Grey Zone, at barebones productions.

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crippling pain, while Gregory Johnstone, Patrick Jordan, Mark Tierno and Randy Kovitz bring an amazing feel of varied humanity to the workers: We see ordinary men trapped in a subhuman world. Mark Staley is both loathsome and nuanced as an SS officer, and a haunting Chelsea Mervis plays a camp victim.

I'm not sure why anyone would *want* to see this play, but I'm very sure it's important that you do.

The Grey Zone continues through Nov. 29. North Building, 121 Seventh St., Downtown (above Bossa Nova). 412-363-5847

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There's not a lot of subtlety, but then the audience wasn't looking for subtext; they wanted action, romance, easily recognized evil-doers and, especially, good triumphant. [December 14, 2006]

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