

Live review: I Am the Machine Gunner at Raue Center for the Arts

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Sandwiched between *As Long As I'm Singing: The Music of Bobby Darin* and *The Neverly Brothers* in the schedule for Crystal Lake's [Raue Center for the Arts](#), Yury Klavdiev's *I Am the Machine Gunner* seems wildly incongruous, as if Belle & Sebastian headlined a night at the Gathering of the Juggalos. Russian author Klavdiev, a spiritual comrade of such British "New Brutalist" writers as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, draws on his own experience as a gang member as well as his grandfather's horrifying service on the Eastern Front during World War II for this searing monologue. As performed on October 9 and 10 by James Knight in a U.S. premiere touring production co-sponsored by Raue with Baltimore's [Generous Company](#), it offers a darkly fascinating meditation on the allure and reality of extreme violence.

Against a backdrop of scrawled Cyrillic graffiti, the imposing Knight, his neck, arms and hands webbed with tattoos, cuts deftly between two narratives. In the present day, the narrator details his recent brawls with rival gangs as he heads to meet his "people" at a deadly rendezvous. The bulk of the piece, though, is given over to his machine gunner grandfather's tales of a nightmarish battle at [Moonzund Archipelago](#), where, after single-handedly holding off German forces for days, he was ultimately captured, doused with gasoline and set aflame. Luckily or not, he survived.

The author has an eye for grisly detail: At one point, the gunner watches from a beach as hordes of Russian sailors, their own ship sunk and slicking oil, ignore their impending deaths to slaughter similarly marooned Germans amid the burning waves. Later, he idly shoots at crows and watches as they fall to earth, rained on by their own blood. You could be forgiven for wishing you were at the Neverly Brothers. But Knight works wonders with this grim material, finding moments of humor in the carnage, subtly but distinctly marking the shifts between the two timelines. He's supported by David M. White's spare staging, which is punctuated by a stunning coup featuring spent cartridges raining down onto the stage. Above all, Knight and White drive Klavdiev's relentless narrative forward.

Artistically, that's a good move, even if it's a little troubling ethically. Like Sam Peckinpah or Quentin Tarantino, the playwright could easily be accused of glorifying the horrors that he renders so lovingly. And when Knight as grandson delivers accolades to the gunner's pure will, denouncing his own criminal escapades as lacking the lofty ferocity of his grandfather's devotion to killing, the word *fascism* may come to mind. All the same, even if Klavdiev's philosophy could stand some enrichment, the verve of his bleak play is unmistakable, and it brings home the immense, still-raw trauma of the war's singular brutality in Russia. Raue deserves a lot of credit for presenting this challenging, triumphant production; it'd be nice if this one-weekend stay led to a longer local run.

Tags: [David M. White](#), [James Knight](#), [Raue Center for the Arts](#), [Yury Klavdiev](#)