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Frolicsome read of 'All the Great Books'

Crash course in Western lit given odd spin

By TOM BUTLER

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"All the Great Books (abridged)" certainly kept the large audience at the Delaware Theatre Company laughing Saturday night.

The show's premise -- three volunteer teachers trying to help a crowd of failed Western literature students through a remedial crash course -- holds up pretty well. Of course, the "teachers" rely on bad puns, double entendres, pratfalls, lots of outrageous cross-dressing and a barrage of references to popular culture and politics to drag the class through the 86-book "syllabus."

Lynn Robert Berg as the drama teacher called Professor, Paul Hurley as a very politically correct student-teacher, and Jason O'Connell as the coach manage to satirize many of the masterpieces of Western culture from the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" through "War and Peace" and "The Grapes of Wrath."

Director Anne Marie Cammarato tends to let the players have a free hand with sight gags and props and to milk a joke if it seems to be working. Most of them do work well.

"All the Great Books (abridged)" comes from Britain's Reduced Shakespeare Company, the same bunch of zanies that wrote "The Complete Works of Wm. Shakespeare (abridged)" which was a big hit at DTC last season.

The current play is a bit more static and talky than the original and lacks some of the brilliant comic conceits.

But no one in the theater seemed to be concerned about this evening of

comedy. Few moments passed without sustained chortles, guffaws and outright roars.

The show uses a lot of monologues and set pieces to skewer the classic writings, but the biggest laughs came from parodies of contemporary events.

Dickens novels are merged with TV soap operas to good effect with lines about "The Bold and the Beautiful" and "The Young and the Restless" coexisting with lines from "Oliver Twist" and "A Tale of Two Cities." O'Connell's coach character explicates "Little Women" as a baseball "chalk talk," complete with A-Rod references.

"Don Quixote" is summarized completely in Spanish, with Hurley providing an English translation. The more colorful expletives [not part of the original novel] are sanitized in English. The audience seemed to enjoy this bit a great deal. A long "Huckleberry Finn" section is less successful.

Homer gets a full treatment with Berg portraying Odysseus as William Shatner portraying Captain Kirk from "Star Trek." The players were able to sustain the comedy throughout this long sketch.

The second half began with James Joyce's "Ulysses" and got intellectual with a series of gags about interior monologues. A game show featuring Jane Austen, George Eliot -- her real name was Mary Anne Evans -- and Virginia Wolfe as dating-game contestants showcased the performers' skills with silly wigs, fake bosoms and wraparound skirts.

Much of the remainder of the show focused on "War and Peace." The company abridged the estimated 1,000,000 pages into a string of fast-paced prop gags culminating in a sports ball battle, first among the performers and then between the audience and the actors.

Throw in a bit of literal book juggling and you get a feel for this silly but quite entertaining theatrical romp. The DTC provided the usual high production values with a book-filled library backdrop by Eric Schaeffer and some very funny sound design by Christopher Colucci.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "All the Great Books (abridged)" by Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor

WHEN: 8 p.m. Wed.-Sat., except 6:30 p.m. Fri.; 2 p.m. Wed. and Sat.-

Sun, through April 19

WHERE: Delaware Theatre Company, 200 Water St., Wilmington

TICKETS AND INFORMATION: Tickets are \$15-\$49. Information can be found at 594-1100 or www.delawaretheatre.org.
