

Madcap Shakespeare gets roars from audience

Monty Python mixes with Marx Brothers at Delaware Theatre Company

By TOM BUTLER, Special to The News Journal

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Zany, madcap, screwball.

Sound like words to describe plays by Shakespeare? Well, yes, actually. But certainly not pieces like "Romeo and Juliet" or, heavens, "Hamlet."

"The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" applies the aesthetics of Monty Python and the Marx Brothers to all of the Bard's plays, even the most revered.

Written by the Reduced Shakespeare Company of England nearly 20 years ago, the play treats the audience to an evening of inspired silliness. The current production at the [Delaware](#) Theatre Company benefits mightily from the efforts of an artistic staff that really does know how to stage Shakespeare's works, making the satire all the more biting and the jokes all the more entertaining.

Director Steve Tague, a professor in the [University of Delaware's](#) Professional Theatre Training Program, gives his three actors free rein to exercise the improvisatory comedy that keeps the material fresh and current. High production values in sets, lighting and costumes make it clear that the comedy only appears haphazard. This is solid, engaging theater.

Jason O'Connell, Jeffrey C. Hawkins and Joseph Midyett, playing characters named Jason, Jeffrey and Joe, mug their way through all the plays (38 if you count "The Two Noble Kinsmen," which Midyett exploits for a really silly pun).

O'Connell usually takes the relatively "normal" role, with Hawkins playing the scholarly narrator and Midyett handling the more absurd and simple-minded bits. They have a great time with "Romeo and Juliet," mangling many of the actual lines to fit their broad, burlesque style. Midyett dons his first of many female wigs and in a hilarious drag outfit flounces about the stage using a Valley Girl accent and demonstrating a real facility for simulated vomiting. He and O'Connell as Romeo thrill the audience with a dance scene straight out of "Pulp Fiction."

Having already informed the audience that they "don't know Shakespeare from Shinola," the trio glide into a version of the gory "Titus Andronicus" presented as a cooking show. The real play and the skit they present feature torture, mutilation and the feeding of a son's dismembered body to his mother as an act of revenge.

Hawkins' Julia Child approach to the main character draws lots of mean-spirited laughter. An elaborate illuminated "Roman Meals" logo further demonstrates the effectiveness of Stephanie Hansen's set design.

The show links all 16 of Shakespeare's comedies into a droll amalgam titled "The Love Boat Goes to Verona," in which the actors wearing smoking jackets and sitting in Morris chairs mock the cross-dressing, shipwrecks, family conflicts and cases of mistaken identity that form the plots of nearly all the comedies. The history plays with the confusing array of Henrys and Richards is treated as football game, complete with scoreboard.

After intermission, the players finally stage "Hamlet," raising not only the comic stakes but also involving the audience.

In this section, the actors themselves become satiric targets, as they demonstrate some of the vanity for which all players are famous. Once

they get the audience engaged, the energy level stokes up quickly. First a woman is lured on stage to play Ophelia. All she has to do is scream. The actors soon decide to "workshop" her performance style and draw the whole audience into a Freudian analysis that has everyone shouting conflicting advice to the "actress."

O'Connell and Hawkins also engage in a riotous slow-motion duel that keeps the large crowd howling. Then, just for fun, the company restages "Hamlet" faster, then faster still, then backwards.

Judging by the laughter and applause the audience clearly enjoyed the show, and most could surely distinguish the works of the Bard from shoe polish.

THEATER REVIEW

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) By Adam Long, Daniel Singer & Jess Winfield

WHEN: 8 p.m. Wed.-Sat., through Dec. 22; 6:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 16; 7:30p.m. Sunday, Dec. 23; matinees, 2 p.m. Wed., Sat.-Sun. through Dec. 23.

WHERE: 200 Water St., [Wilmington](#)

TICKETS: \$31-\$49 depending on performance; \$15 under 25

594-1100 or www.delawaretheatre.org