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MSU's 'Arts' smart, fast fun

Written by **Mary C. Cusack**

Wednesday, 14 November 2007

It's an age-old debate. What elevates a creative act from a craft to an art? It is a question that can never be definitively answered, yet one that craftsmen, artists, philosophers, educators, patrons and argumentative types love to dispute, particularly when their lips have been lubricated by the art of the viniculturists. Or is winemaking a craft?

This very question is addressed in one of the nearly 30 vignettes that make up Michigan State University's "Arts or Crafts." A moonshiner and a wine aficionado prepare their drinks of choice with equal care but an inequitable show of culture. In the end, the result is the same: cheerful drunkenness.

Most people have some idea of where they draw the line between art and craft. Some peer down their noses at hobbyists who toil as long and hard on a quilt as Da Vinci did on the Mona Lisa. Mona Lisa herself appears in the play, positing that her famous portrait is akin to an episode of "Seinfeld" — it is about nothing.

Rob Roznowski, head of acting in MSU's Theatre Department, wrote and directed this play for the university's "Year of Arts and Culture." The theme could easily be a set-up for the playwright to skewer the crafts and elevate his own ideal of art, but Roznowski approaches the topic objectively, presenting differing opinions about what is art and what is craft. In one touching scene, an everywoman housewife downplays the values of her scrap booking, only to show in the end that she is indeed creating something very, very special.

The ensemble cast of 20, each of whom plays a dozen or more characters, does an excellent job demonstrating their versatility as they swiftly switch ages, accents, sexuality and situations.

The fast-paced show slows only for the occasional poignant moment. Top on that list is the true story of an Afghan artist who camouflaged objectionable subject matter in paintings with watercolor to prevent the Taliban from ordering their destruction.

The slick use of multimedia enhances the script, adding information and veracity. Designer Justin Miller's origami-inspired stage is impressively simple and helps keep the pace snappy, allowing for very quick changes. Perhaps the most visually stunning work is that of costume designers Jodi Ozimek and Amber Cook, who create timeless fashions in classic black and white, contradicting the play's message that nothing is black and white.

In a humorous meta-moment, the actors portray the principle creators of the play, discussing the process behind their creative contribution only to be challenged by those who came before them throughout the history of theater. The scene ends in a melee typically reserved for soccer hooligans.

"Arts or Crafts" does not answer its own question or place more value on one or the other. Instead it shows that little purpose but a lot of fun can be had in continuing the debate.

'Arts or Crafts'
Through Nov. 18
MSU Department of Theatre
Wharton Center's Pasant Theatre
7:30 p.m. Tuesday – Thursday
8 p.m. Friday
2 p.m. & 8 p.m. Saturday

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November 14:

• **Tom Perrotta**, author of "The Abstinence Teacher"

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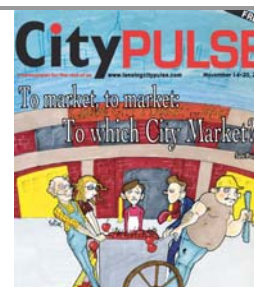
Hear Berl every Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. on **The Jack Ebling Show** on WILS 1320-AM.

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