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Shakespeare, Frankenstein, meals and death

Old Town's 'Renegade Theatre Festival' runs a gargantuan gamut

by City Pulse Staff



The 8th annual Renegade Theatre Festival turned Lansing's Old Town into a kaleidoscopic, life-sized arcade of make-believe places and characters last weekend, with no need to drop a quarter in to keep the stories going. Fully staged plays were woven with staged readings of new works, music, storytelling and spoken-word performances. The live theater community, and allies from related arts, came together for a last hurrah of summer and flaunted the diversity of local talent. Here's a sampling of reviews from our critics Tom Helma, Ute von der Hayden and Mary Cusack.

'Awake and Sing'

From the audience's perspective, Lansing Community College's student-staged reading of "Awake and Sing" by Clifford Odets felt like sitting through the first rehearsal. It wasn't for lack of substance. The play is full of great lines like "in my day, propaganda was for God; now it's for success." Before the reading began, director Deborah Keller pointed out key themes of Odets' Depression-era script, such as family loyalty versus independence and the immigrant American Dream versus

stark reality. The actors in period costumes demonstrated impressive proficiency with the Bronx accent, but an understandable but disappointing lack of preparation dulled the script's potential power.

– Paul Wozniak

'Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner'

This gem just got some more polish. Last year's staged reading of Brad Rutledge's short three-act play was a showpiece for this year's festival, demonstrating that constructive feedback can make a good play even better. It begins in a nursing home where a silent woman has breakfast with her husband, who cannot stop reflecting that he could have loved her better. Lunch finds a struggling couple at mid-life. Dinner depicts a young couple on a first serious date. Rutledge directed and starred alongside Shannon Rafferty, playing each of the three couples in a way that evoked great empathy and understanding. As the relationships played out at different ages, the audience seemed to see themselves (or someone they knew) in each scenario.

– Tom Helma

'6 Actors, 2 Characters, 1 Scene'

The hidden jewel of this year's Renegade Festival may have been "6 Actors, 2 Characters, 1 Scene," from MSU's Department of Theatre — hidden, that is, only until the first performance ended Thursday night. Then it became the talk of the street, the must-see of the festival.

This wasn't a full production, staged reading, or new script, but a class exercise Rob Roznowski, head of acting and directing, has been doing with his Master of Fine Arts students for several years. In the exercise, a group of actors take turns playing the same role in the same scene. It's up to each actor to decide when to jump in and take over a role and exactly how to play it. The goal is to show how an actor's choices affect the play and, in turn, shape the audience's experience.

The scene chosen was based on "Miss Julie," August Strindberg's tragic tale of social class, power, love and lust. The two characters are Julie, a headstrong, aristocratic woman, and Jean, her father's ambitious valet, with whom she has an affair. MFA students Carolyn Conover, Sarah Goeke and Jacqueline Wheeler played Julie; Andrew Head, Kirill Sheynerman and Zev Steinberg played Jean.

In the hands of these talented people, this was not dusty academic stuff, but a fascinating, beautifully performed examination of the art and magic of acting.

– Ute von der Hayden

'Invierno'

One of the most interesting aspects of the Renegade Festival is a chance to see works in progress. One such play, "Invierno," adapted Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" to mid-1800's California. The American Shakespeare Collective is working with the playwright, Jose Cruz Gonzalez, as he refines the script, with the goal of producing it in June of 2014. The Renegade reading featured a strong cast, including the collective's founder, Tommy Gomez, and MSU's Christina Traister. Gonzalez has researched the new setting well, and makes good use of the clash of cultures at a tipping point in American history. However, he also adds a bizarre sub-plot involving a pair of modern-day teens who are transported back in time to inhabit the bodies of central characters, which adds more bloat to an already complex plot.

– Mary Cusack

'The Gravedigger: A Frankenstein Play'

Williamston Theatre has produced several of Joseph Zettelmaier's works, including "It Came from Mars," "Dead Man's Shoes," and "Ebenezer." At the Renegade Festival, the Williamston troupe packed Absolute Gallery with a fine reading of Zettelmaier's latest original play. If produced, "Gravedigger," with its pleasing mix of humor and gravitas, will certainly be another Williamston success. Directed by Lynn Lammers, this reading was well cast and acted, making it feel like an almost complete production, minus the actual berserk-monster scenes. (There was no scenery to chew anyway.) Blake Bowen had a phenomenal physical presence and captured the measured cadence of a monster learning to become a man so well it is hard to imagine anyone else in the role. Here's hoping that he gets the chance to keep on shambling in an upcoming season at Williamston.

– Mary Cusack

'Betty'

The sleeper in this year's festival was the full-length "Betty," which won the prestigious NOW award for best new play and which will be performed at Lansing Community College with full costuming and set design.

An extended family of 11 cranky-pants members, accompanied by a quirky New Age Irish priest, gather to fight over the aforementioned, and deceased, Betty. Is it difficult to direct a play in which each of 12 characters has a unique voice? Yep. Did writer Allison Brown nail it? Uh-huh! The characters oscillated from intimacy to