

Ghostlight Theatre's Production of Martin's "The Underpants" Hilarious

Written by Jill Walsh

Tuesday, 14 September 2004 18:00

Just when I was convinced that *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* would endure as Steve Martin's wittiest, funniest theatre script, the multi-talented writer/actor/comedian has outdone himself, with the adapted comedy *The Underpants*

As with *Picasso*, Martin in *The Underpants* proves he is a master of wordplay, as well as a writer who deftly explores the complexity of male/female relationships and sexual desire in everyday life. *The Underpants* isn't just a saucy, lighthearted romp through a 1910 apartment room in Dusseldorf, Germany (though it is very much that); Martin gives us the chance to laugh at our own eccentricities, celebrate our relationships, and embrace the humor in the situation he has proposed. His ability to combine outrageous melodramatic physical humor with solid, believable characters whose credible desires lead them to act impulsively is pure genius, and was a perfect choice for Ghostlight Theatre, which has just kicked off its 10-year anniversary season.

For Ghostlight's production of *The Underpants* at the Holzworth Performing Arts Center of Davenport North High School, the large auditorium seating was kept dark, with people moved on-stage to intimately surround the action.

Set in quaint pre-World War Germany, the drama begins with Theo Maske (Michael King) scolding his wife Louise (Stephanie Alexander) for letting her underpants fall around her ankles during the king's parade. Theo is a number-puncher who claims not to enjoy any attention and whose goal is to remain neutral and unnoticed.

Louise, on the other hand, is a dreamer, stuck in an unloving relationship (she admits the only time she and Theo have ever been "together" was on their wedding night one year ago). The pretty young woman longs for excitement and lust in her life, and is urged by her eavesdropping upstairs neighbor, Gertrude (Lori Mariner), to pursue an affair.

Enter Versati, a loud, well-dressed, unpublished poet who wants to rent the advertised room from the Maskes. He admits (to Louise only) to seeing her at the parade at the moment when her underpants fell, and longs to be near her. Unfortunately, Theo has already promised the spare room to the hypochondriac Cohen (a Jew who outsmarts the Maskes by saying his name is spelled with a "K"). Unbeknownst to Theo, Cohen also saw Frau Maske in the park when she dropped her drawers and also wants an affair with her. Well, chaos and unaccomplished passion ensue among the housemates, which makes for an amusing conclusion involving the king and an old handicapped German scientist named Klingehoff.

Ghostlight's group does an admirable job of pulling off Martin's quirky comedy. Michael King is phenomenal and consistently amusing as the unrelenting, unpassionate Theo. His stoic, business-like attitude toward Louise, his obsession with his "muscular" body, and mostly his ironic unawareness of the underpants situation give his character depth and make us enjoy his overdone arrogance even more. Stephanie Alexander plays the young housewife with both the girlish innocence and seductive femininity that Martin intended for the many-layered character.

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Though it was a smaller role, Reid Robinson as Klingelhoff had the perfect German-accented delivery and timing for his "Thundering pussy ass balls!" exclamation toward the end of the show, which actually brought tears of laughter to my eyes. And while Nick Hustrom as Cohen didn't always have the most understandable line delivery, his physical-comedy sequence involving a sleeping tonic was hilarious.

My only qualms with the show were some of the costumes, which were not consistent with the period (Since when did Germans in 1910 wear sandals from modern-day Target?) and, in one case, not stage-friendly. (A skirt fell off one character during the middle of the show – appropriate to the piece, I suppose, but unintentionally so.)

In short, *The Underpants* is hilarious. From sexual innuendos involving a sausage to stodgy old Klingelhoff's swearing streak to Versati's frequent attempts to turn Louise into a poem, the play is in constant, whirlwind motion. Ghostlight has chosen a memorable comedy that definitely deserves taking a peek at.

The Underpants continues with performances Thursday through Sunday at the Holzworth Performing Arts Center at Davenport North High School. Show times are 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and 2:30 p.m. Sunday. For tickets, call (563)505-7507 or visit (<http://www.ghostlighttheatre.org>).