

Written by Mike Schulz
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Circa '21's *Winnie the Pooh* at The Rocket through July 23

At the opening-day performance of *Winnie the Pooh*, the air was already so festive – their doors may be temporarily closed, but the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse is still in business! – that the show was the recipient of enormous goodwill even before it began. Balloons decorated the street, the Rocket Theatre was alive with the noise of excited young uns, the parents seemed in surprisingly good moods ... it was a pretty sweet sight. If you have as much fondness for Circa '21 as I do – and I know some of you do, 'cause I've *seen* you there ... – the atmosphere alone would have made *Winnie the Pooh* worthwhile.

Which brings us to the show itself. The script I'm not crazy about. (I've appeared in two separate productions of it, so I dislike it more than most.) For a presentation geared toward a really young age group – I'd say four to eight – *Winnie the Pooh* is incredibly talky; there are a lot of scenes in which characters stand around jabbering for minutes on end, which creates an easily restless audience. (It's a good thing the characters yell a lot.) As a leading character, Pooh (played here by Jack Sweeney), to be honest, is a bit of a simp. And with only a couple of exceptions, the songs are soporific to the point of catatonia; they should come served with a

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graham cracker and a box of milk.

So, yeah, I'm not the biggest fan. But Circa '21's current production is so much incrementally better than the script itself that it might just be the most *heroic* area show currently running; the director and actors are doing a lot of heavy lifting to make this

Winnie the Pooh
as entertaining as it is.

Director Tom Walljasper adds delightful bits of comedy and stage business – like the recruitment of audience volunteers – that keep the kids happy, and he brings out in his performers much of the outsized-yet-graceful physicality that he himself is known for as an actor. Among a topnotch cast, Bret Churchill is a fantastic Tigger, darting around with cartoonish glee and the possessor of a *great* howl; Russell Berberich expresses Eeyore's drawling misery like the A.A. Milne version of a Blue Collar comedian; Sunshine Woolison is a sweetly boisterous Piglet (the role of Sally in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* is begging for her); and Kevin Grastorf does a subtle and hilarious turn as Roo's mother Kanga, here a more anal-retentive version of Mary Poppins. This cast and director Walljasper have presented *Winnie the Pooh* so well that, despite my natural aversion to the show, I'd happily sit through it again.

Well, almost. I still kinda hate it.

***Dingo Boogaloo 2: Taco's Revenge* at ComedySportz through July 17**

Comedy is always a matter of taste, and days after seeing it, I still can't get the taste of *Dingo Boogaloo 2: Taco's Revenge* out of my mouth. Some might very well find My Verona Productions' staged sketch comedy hysterical, but I thought it was puerile, depressing, and deeply offensive, though not in the ways that co-producers-writers-directors-performers Sean Leary and Tristan Layne Tapscott might have hoped.

In whatever entertainment medium you choose, works that bully you into liking them are to be avoided, and I felt bullied by *Taco's Revenge* from moment one. This show is so smug in its assurance that everything about it is, in fact, hilarious, that I resented it more with each passing sketch; the overriding feeling seems to be: If you're offended by what we're doing, you're a prude, and if you're looking for what we're doing to make *sense*, you're not hip.

Well I, for one, *was* offended, though not by the language or the subject matter. I'm offended because it did nothing funny *with* the language or subject matter. In most

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sketch-comedy skits, a comic idea is established and then explored; here, a comic idea is established and then ... blackout. So if you don't find anything inherently funny in the *ideas*

behind

Taco's Revenge

's disparate skits, you're out of luck, because ideas are all this production has. (Okay, so gays are silly and guys are pigs and rock critics are stupid.

And ... ?

)

Unfortunately, I found nearly all the show's ideas infantile at best, repellent at worst, and in all cases, profoundly unfunny. Yet *Taco's Revenge* proudly carries on as if it were hilarious, especially when shoving its profanity and sexual suggestion down our throats, as if they were badges of honor. "Look at us!" the production seems to shriek. "We swear! And talk about sex!

We're

shocking!" The only thing that's *truly*

shocking, however, is that My Verona is following its wonderful production of

Closer

with a work that's this dispiriting.