

Funny Makes the World Go Around: "The Miser" at Augustana College

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 07 February 2006 18:00

If you're a *Simpsons* fan and have always wondered what the hateful C. Montgomery Burns would look like in the flesh, you are advised to immediately secure tickets to Augustana College's production of *The Miser*, in which Brian Bengtson is giving a flawless approximation of Homer's hysterically hateful nemesis.

Strike that. Even if you couldn't care *less* about *The Simpsons*, Bengtson's portrayal is not to be missed; playing Molière's titular tightwad, Harpagon, this young performer is currently having such a great time on the Potter Hall stage – with comic instincts so sharp and timing so assured – that the two hours spent in his company are almost criminally enjoyable. Not to slight the rest of the production's talented cast, the ingenuity of director Jeff Coussens' staging, or the considerable gifts of husband-and-wife design team Gil and Patty Koenigsaecker, but in this *Miser*

, Bengtson is a downright marvel; the standing-ovation that greeted his curtain call on Friday night was richly deserved. (Bengtson's not just a marvel but a *chameleon*

: As the house lights dimmed before I had the chance to skim the

Miser

program, I watched his joyous performance in Act I thinking, "Where did this guy

come

from?" It wasn't until intermission that I discovered I had previously admired – and, in these pages, raved about – him in Augustana's last

two

productions.

That's

a character actor.)

Giving a performance this good is, of course, easier when you have a role written with the comedic richness of Harpagon, one of Molière's most brilliantly satiric creations. *The Miser's* plot is one of the French playwright's classical, slapstick roundelays involving thwarted love and mistaken identity, but it's the foul, desiccated ogre Harpagon who, if played well, earns the audience's love. His nearly sexual desire for his riches – he refers to his loot as a "her" – makes stinginess a hysterically appealing character trait, and Bengtson properly convinces you that money is the only thing on this old wretch's mind. (Well, almost: When Harpagon confronts his son, Kevin Wender's Cleante, about how often the young man has been secretly dallying with the old man's fiancée and Cleante responds, "As often as I can fit it in," Bengtson brings down the house with his reading of "Fit.

What

. In?") Bengtson plays his withering-old-coot caricature with speed and incredible style, yet is gracious enough not to hog the spotlight; you never feel he's earning his laughs at the expense of the of the others' contributions.

Not that that would be *easy*. After his thrilling work in Augustana's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

, David Cocks, playing Valere, is two-for-two at playing Haughty European Cad sensationally well – his line readings are stunningly confident – and Christine Barnes, as his lover Elise, is a daffy, wide-eyed comedienne; Elise's gamin charms are irresistible. Wilder Anderson makes a late

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appearance as Seigneur Anselme, and performs with robust *joie de vivre*

; he's like Mandy Patinkin's Inigo Montoya with sly self-awareness. Emily Chouinard's Dame Claude, schlepped around the stage like a prop, is enormously entertaining without having a single line of dialogue, and Charlie Zamastil, as the jack-of-all-trades Master Jacques (who, thankfully, has a

lot

of dialogue) is tremendously funny, delivering his lines with unpredictable, eccentric brio.

I would have enjoyed Cori Veverka's matchmaker, Frosine, more had I not recently seen this gifted actress give a very similar performance in Augustana's *Ernest*; though Frosine is a few decades younger than Lady Bracknell, Veverka, with her comically contemptuous arched eyebrow, is again playing the sanest one in the room, and the delivery of her

bon mots

feels a little too practiced. In fact, my biggest complaint with this

Miser

lies in its tonal similarity to autumn's

Ernest

; I understand that the theatre's main-stage shows are part of a running motif – The Masks of Comedy – but did that necessarily mean that (Veverka's two roles excepted) the female characters in Augustana's first two productions this season had to be such twitterbrains? The female talents in Augustana's theatre department deserve the chance to play it

smart

.

Yet *The Miser* we have, and *The Miser* I will more than happily accept. Working from a superb translation by James Magruder, Coussens stages the escalating madness with sublime dexterity and knows just how long to hold his comic inspirations for maximum hilarity – the fourth-wall-breaking sequence of Harpagon sizing up the audience, trying to determine which of us might have stolen his fortune, is so exquisitely timed that it's nearly breathtaking. In the program, Coussens ends his production notes by writing that if "laughter is indeed the best medicine, then I hope that even the cranks among you will be smiling broadly at evening's end." I can't testify as to whether the cranks were in attendance, but that "smiling broadly" part was handily accomplished.

The Miser plays at Augustana College's Potter Hall through February 12. For tickets, call (309) 794-7306.