

Winged Ovation: "The Birds," at Lincoln Park through August 13

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 08 August 2006 22:37

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Oh *man*, how I'm going to miss Don Wooten.

The Genesis Guild founder, who will be retiring from active Guild duties after this, his 50th season with the organization, kicked off Saturday night's production of Aristophanes' *The Birds* with a few opening remarks to the Lincoln Park audience, and as is often the case, they were the most sincere, relaxed, and effortlessly amusing words heard all night. (Wooten also serves as

The Birds'

director and, uncredited, wrote its faithful but

very

loosely structured Genesis adaptation.)

With delightful bluntness, Wooten summarized the inherent difficulties in staging Greek comedies, saying that while works of this sort enthralled crowds in their day, "They aren't very *f*

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unny

." He explained the plot of the evening's show with succinct clarity, and earned a chuckle by revealing that on the Greek playwright's list of human pests - including lawyers and tax assessors - that must be contended with, "Aristophanes put

poets

first." He mentioned the season-closing comedy's unusually long running length, saying that *The Birds*

would last roughly an hour and 15 minutes, or "an hour 20 if you laugh." He even managed to ask for donations without making us feel the least bit

guilty

about it.

Wooten is a charming, engaging speaker, but audiences shouldn't be fooled by his grandfatherly countenance - he also has a playfully wicked sense of humor. His adaptation of *The Birds*

, like past season-enders for Genesis Guild, peppers a classical story and structure with comedic references to national celebrities, events, and disgraces; the evening's heartiest laugh came when one character described another as "the kind of man who'd shoot

quail

in

Texas

." And not just

national

disgraces -

The Birds

' gags about Ann Coulter and Libertarians sit comfortably alongside jabs at emerging pork plants and the Moline City Council. (This, however, isn't mere artistic license, as Wooten revealed in his pre-show comments that Greek comedies, in their day, continually poked fun at local institutions and politicians.)

And in *The Birds*, Wooten even pulls off clever comedic bits through *song*; an introductory routine between Pat Flaherty's Pithetairos and Peter Soderberg's Euelpedes manages to set the tone of the show, summarize the plot, and throw in a series of pop-and-local-culture asides in about two minutes of stage time. And the tune this number is being performed to? A 1932 ditty entitled "Let's All Sing Like the Birdies Sing." Priceless.

Not all of Wooten's ideas here pan out. The introduction of Tom Moldy (Bryan Woods) and Dana Scuzzie (Melita Tunnickliff) - of the "Generation X Files" - is a gag that's at least a decade past its prime, and the constant references to the show's play-within-a-play formula become a little exhausting, and are sometimes downright confusing; occasionally, we're not sure if comic

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routines are meant to be parodies of theatrical clunkiness or are, in fact, the real thing.

This particular deficiency would be less pronounced if the production's many cast members - 30, if I counted correctly - played Wooten's script with so much speed and confidence that we didn't have time to notice the bum jokes and occasional awkwardness. But too many of the show's participants look distractingly unsure of themselves - as if they know they're supposed to be funny but don't quite know *why* - and the pacing tends to drag; there are a lot of holes between the end of one performer's line and the beginning of another's.

A few make fine impressions. Dan Kuhn appears to be having fun as a Woodstock-era hippie in the guise of a poet; he displays a zonked stoner charm. Earl Strupp delivers some amusingly aggrieved line readings as Poseidon; Thomas Matheu's makes a joyfully hyperactive entrance as one of the messengers; and Jonathan Gregoire, despite not being on stage nearly enough, is enjoyable as the nervous, in-hiding-for-*really*-good-reason Prometheus. Patti Flaherty, never less than wonderful, makes her Iris both a blowzy, good-time gal and a vocally intimidating powerhouse. And the professionalism of Flaherty's real-life husband, Pat, and Peter Soderberg provides the show with a solid anchor - I wish they gave the impression that they were having more *fun*.

Because, more often than not, the *audience* is. Ellen Dixon's colorful, hilariously hodgepodge costumes are practically a night's entertainment all to themselves (it's no insult to say that the wardrobe looks spectacularly amateurish), and every time the show threatens to unravel, something - an unexpectedly brilliant joke, a septet of dancing birds - will start you smiling all over again. *The Birds* is silly, it's sloppy, it's corny ... and it's Don Wooten. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

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