

Written by Mike Schulz

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In November, I had the chance to see Scott Community College's presentation of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare [abridged]*

, and the production, like the play itself, was a hit-and-miss spoof on the Bard's entire output. Not all of the jokes - nor all of the performances - were at peak freshness, but it was still an agreeably goofball entertainment that showcased a number of promising actors, and so I had every reason to expect the same from the school's current offering,

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Richard Blaine, the Merchant of Morocco
, as its subtitle is a pretty fair précis for the show as a whole:
Or, If Shakespeare Had Written
Casablanca.

Playwright Thomas Hischak's comedic one-act clocks in at slightly under an hour, and is just what you'd expect it to be: an abbreviated re-telling of the Humphrey Bogart-Ingrid Bergman classic, with all of Shakespeare's most quotable quotes accounted for, and the movie's memorable dialogue given an Elizabethan spin. (You get no points for correctly assuming that "Here's looking at thee, kid" will be uttered at least once.) Yet while many of the verbal gags are predictable, Hischak's stunt is certainly well-sustained, and the piece allows its cast the rare opportunity to parody two distinct performance styles simultaneously - at least in theory.

Unexpectedly, though, Scott's production of *Richard Blaine* turns out to be less a companion piece to *The Complete Works* than its polar opposite - a Shakespeare riff played *straight*

. Under Steve Flanigin's direction, the actors don't indulge in any wink-wink, nudge-nudge telegraphing of Hischak's wordplay, and they perform the dialogue as if their characters didn't know the lines were funny, which is a considerable blessing. (Traditionally, the best way to kill a gag is to oversell it.) The audience at Thursday night's performance, however, didn't audibly laugh at the show - not once - and the strange thing is I'm not sure we were *meant* to.

As presented here, Rick, Ilsa, and the rest of the gang have the same relationships and motivations that you remember from the movie, and they enact the *Casablanca* storyline with absolute earnestness; the characters, it seems, all just *happen* to speak in the Elizabethan style. Yet while the decision to produce this material with the utmost seriousness is kind of admirable, it's also kind of wrong-headed, because if you're not going to embrace the silliness in Hischak's conceit, what's the point of doing the show at all? Why not just re-stage *Casablanca* ?

It's easy to tell where the punchlines are supposed to be in this *Richard Blaine* - you only need a remedial knowledge of the Bard's works to get the references here - yet the jokes are so

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underplayed as to not be played at all, and as a result, the Elizabethan language just winds up impeding the action. Even those of us familiar with

Casablanca

might find it hard to follow the show's plot, because with the farcical element eliminated, we're given no

reason

for the characters to be speaking in such a florid style; every time someone says "But soft ... !" or "Zounds!", you're thrown out of the story's reality. (It might be telling that the most amusing lines here are the ones that remain intact from the

Casablanca

script.)

For Flanigin's interpretation to work, it seems that one of two things needed to happen: Either the performers had to go completely over-the-top with their characterizations, emphasizing the obvious puns and inherent ridiculousness (the way most of the cast did in *The Complete Works*), or they had to play the script with ferocious truth, allowing the humor come from the dichotomy between their no-nonsense roles and their nothing-

but

-nonsense dialogue. Unfortunately, neither happens in

Richard Blaine

. Several of the actors - especially Mandy Landreth as Ilsa, Randy Langtimm as Louis Renault, and Justin Hertner as the bartender (and Shakespearean chorus figure) Sasha - are sincere and relaxed, but no one appears entirely confident about how far to take their roles either farcically

or

dramatically; even when the performers seem aware that they're in a comedy, they seem unclear about why it

is

a comedy.

Richard Blaine isn't lifeless. The scenes set in Rick's Café, with patrons miming conversation and continually lighting one another's cigarettes, are filled with enjoyable background activity - the slyly subtle Hertner is particularly fun to watch - and the dialogue is quick and clever enough that even if you don't laugh, at least you smile frequently. And the show occasionally suggests, as *The Complete Works* often did, that Scott's actors are ready and willing to be funny. I'm just hoping that for the school's next comic endeavor, everyone - cast and audience members alike - is allowed to be in on the joke.

Cassioblanca: "Richard Blaine, the Merchant of Morocco," at Scott Community College through March 16

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Richard Blaine, the Merchant of Morocco is being performed in Scott Community College's Student Life Center, located through Door 5, off Parking Lot D. For information, call (563)441-4339.