

Written by Mike Schulz

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As Black Hawk College's current production of *Death in Character* is a comedic murder mystery, I wouldn't dream of revealing whodunit. But I do feel the need - and here's your requisite Spoiler Alert - to reveal who *gets*

it, because author Stuart Ardern's one-act is one of the few plays of its type I've seen in which its victim, for the two minutes he's on stage, is the most entertaining figure in the show.

Set in a modern-day London theatre being rented by a struggling performing troupe, *Death in Character*

finds the group's thespians divided into two camps: a quartet of professionals dedicated to producing Shakespeare and Pinter and Wilde, and a pair of rambunctious clowns expert in the low-comedy art of British pantomime. Though the duo's baggy-pants high jinks bring in some bucks, their antics don't sit well with the more serious-minded players - Kaleigh Esparza's Stella (as in Adler?) opines, "Educated people don't go to the theatre to be

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entertained

!" - and as the first half of the play's 45-minute running length comes to a close, the sextet has left the stage, unhappily realizing that a lack of funds is forcing them to give up their lease.

And that's when the horse enters. Or rather, when the clowns (Neil Friberg and Joshua M. Kahn) enter in a tacky, handmade horse *costume*. Trotting in step to a jazzy instrumental accompaniment, the faux steed slowly makes its way center-stage, and proceeds to perform a goofy little dance solely for the actors' amusement (and ours); there are sways and grapevines, and Kahn, in the rear, happily shakes his ass to the music. Given the context, this bizarre, wordless sequence is wonderfully silly - it feels as though

Death in Character

director Dan Haughey has been momentarily replaced by David Lynch - and the merriment could have easily escalated further if two sandbags didn't come crashing down on the horse's head(s).

A pair of detectives (Sarah Hammond and Austin James Stone) are subsequently called in to suss out the comics' killer, yet nothing that happens next - nor, really, anything that happened before - is quite as enjoyable as that dance routine, as it's the one time in the production when you're absolutely sure about what, exactly, is going on. *Death in Character* isn't difficult to follow so much as it's being

made

difficult to follow.



After a prelude that establishes Friberg and Kahn (initially seen hiding behind masks) as incessant jokesters, Ian Heaton's company director gathers the performers together to explain the troupe's woeful finances. But with Heaton left standing, Haughey arranges the other five cast members in a horizontal chorus-line configuration - much like in November's *Going Underground*

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when characters were seated in a subway car - and there's an inherent problem with this sort of staging here: We're not paying much attention to anyone

but

Friberg and Kahn. Their characters, who are only half-engaged in the conversation to begin with, spend most of their time making wisecracks under their breath and cracking one another up and fiddling with props (in one especially inspired moment, Kahn uses the masks as shoulder pads), and the actors are obviously having a blast playing unapologetic cut-ups; their relaxed, joshing enthusiasm is infectious.

It's perhaps *too* infectious, though, because while we're focusing on them, the dialogue of the others is providing crucial backstory and possible motives for the eventual murders, and we're only listening to it with half an ear. Heaton, Esparza, Alysa Grimes, and Dana Jarrard are nicely low-key and don't push their theatrical stereotypes, yet nothing about their portrayals, or the show's staging, suggests that we need to pay particular attention to them; their personalities don't quite register, and by the time the horse is offed, we're not wondering who did it so much as why anyone *would* do it. (The characterizations might've been clarified a bit through less stagnant composition, and more judicious employment of Friberg's and Kahn's ad libs.)

Consequently, once Hammond begins interrogating her suspects, we have some narrative catching up to do, and even *then* the clowns are stealing the show; while the troupe members offer alibis, the comic business involving Stone drawing a chalk circle around the deceased is more engaging than anything being said. (I, for one, kept waiting for the costumed corpses to spring back to life, even after they were discreetly hidden behind a curtain.) There are some good, funny lines in *Death in Character* - especially the reference to the board game Clue and a smartly placed borrowing of Macbeth's "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" - and I'm expecting that even the lesser lines will eventually be enacted with more authority, as the April 8 preview I attended was still technically a rehearsal. Whether Black Hawk's comic mystery will eventually succeed as both comedy and mystery is (sorry) a horse of a different color.

For more information, call (309) 796-5419.