

Animal Magnetism: "Life's a Dream," at the Rock Island Masonic Temple through May 18

Written by Mike Schulz

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Say what you will about the Prenzie Players' latest presentation, but you can't say that the classical-theatre troupe, with its production of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Life's a Dream*, is merely resting on its laurels.

Apart from being the Prenzies' first foray outside of Shakespeare, there's so much here that's outside the group's norm - including a script performed almost exclusively in iambic tetrameter; frontal nudity; random droppings of the F bomb; and what the program succinctly, cheekily describes as "audience migration" - that it's tough to decide what to discuss first. Tough, but not impossible, because even if you're familiar with the Prenzies' previous offerings, you might leave *Life's a Dream* wanting to talk about nothing so much as its staggering lead performance by Eddie Staver III.

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I'm probably sounding like a bit of a broken record, as the actor's portrayals are *frequently* the first thing I want to talk about. But I wouldn't keep repeating myself if Staver wasn't so damned prolific, and so damned good, and his Prince Sigismund in director J.C. Luxton's Calderón adaptation is, to my mind, Staver's strongest area work to date. The playwright's conception of the role - a feral, half-mad prisoner prone to virulent outbursts and surprisingly fervent poetic musings - is an actor's catnip, so grandly multi-faceted that it barely matters that the character himself makes little sense. (This wild child became so eloquent *when*, exactly ... ?)

But given license to overindulge, Staver performs with a dynamically focused intensity and thrilling physicality that feel unfailingly honest; the actor grounds Sigismund in an emotional reality that Calderon's seriocomic dreamscape desperately requires.

Imprisoned since birth - his arrival a prophesied portent of doom for his father, the Polish King Vasily (Tracy Skaggs) - Sigismund is raised, and subsequently behaves, like an animal, and Staver enacts the prince's bestial nature with inventive, unwavering ferocity. Darting about on all fours, snapping and growling, the actor throws himself into the role with frightening conviction, and is witty enough to know when these moments should be played for comedy rather than pathos. (Sigismund doesn't drink liquids; he *chomps* on them.)

Yet Staver's astonishingly well-executed stunt is never *merely* a stunt. Once the prince takes his rightful place as heir to the kingdom of Poland - a turnabout that, he's made to believe, may only be a dream - the performer gives a magnificent interpretation of an animal trying, against all its instincts, to be human. Sigismund attempts to rule, and falls in love with the vengeance-minded Rossaura (a fiercely direct, sensual Maggie Woolley), and at no point does the caged creature within vanish; Staver's prince is both liberated by, and desperately afraid of, the knowledge that he may awaken at any moment. This is a miraculous performance, one I'd be happy to continue describing if doing so wouldn't spoil its bevy of surprises.

It turns out, though, that *Life's a Dream* needs all the passion it can get, because despite being gorgeously produced and acted, this hugely ambitious production is less emotionally resonant than it perhaps should be. (It's the first Prenzie presentation I've seen that seems aimed more toward your head than your heart.) The show is still great fun; there are enormous laughs, most of them courtesy of the outrageously inspired (*Reader i* ntern) Jeff De Leon, and incredibly clever touches throughout. But all during Friday's opening-night performance, I couldn't help feeling strangely distanced from the material, and in ways that were only partly the fault of the script.

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I'll accept much of the blame myself, as iambic tetrameter - on stage, at least - is a poetic form that I've never been crazy about. (No matter how witty the stanzas, and Luxton's adaptation features its share of great ones, I'm rarely paying attention to what's being said so much as I'm trying to guess which word will be used for the inevitable rhyme.) But beyond being written by an author other than the Bard, the piece is unusual in the Prenzies' repertoire for being a play less concerned with people than ideas - specifically, ideas regarding free will versus fate - and several of Calderón's people seem naggingly ill-defined.

For instance, I was never quite sure how we were meant to take the cousins played by Andy Koski and Kristin Skaggs, who are angling for Vasily's throne; despite smart readings by both, Koski is stuck playing variations on smarm, and Skaggs isn't allowed even *that* much personality. And while Tracy Skaggs provides some marvelously lucid exposition, I never understood the "Why

now

?" behind the king's sudden need to determine Poland's royal heir. (Given the sprightliness with which he bounds up stairs, age probably isn't a factor, although to be fair, the explanation may have been given while I was predicting rhymes.) Jeremy Mahr gives a wonderfully controlled performance as Sigismund's attendant - and Rossaura's father - Clothold, one percolating with buried emotion. But Calderón's careful design seems to hamper even him; the characters in

Life's a Dream

oftentimes appear less restricted by fate than the actors do.

While the experience is novel, and the design and atmosphere in both settings splendid, further emotional distancing comes from Luxton's decision to routinely move the audience between two separate playing spaces (Sigismund's prison and the palace); this enjoyable conceit might work better in a more lighthearted piece, as the play's dramatic momentum can't help but be disrupted during the locale shifts. And while the ensemble led by a deliciously fire-spewing Denise Yoder performs with gusto - with the charming newcomer Stephanie Moeller given a

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fantastically mean-spirited (and unexpected) death scene - I wish the Prenzies had resisted the temptation to start the production with an "in character" reminder from the prison guards to turn off cell phones and pagers, a jokey gambit that deflates the tension from the get-go. (Perhaps the guards should've *confiscated* our electronic devices.)

Flaws and all, though, *Life's a Dream* shouldn't be missed. It's dazzlingly interpreted and technically adventurous - the original score composed by the blue::infinite team of Terry Skaggs, Marc Nelson, and Sean Smith is spectacularly eerie and insinuating - and not often in theatre, local or otherwise, do you have the chance to witness a portrayal as jaw-droppingly fine as Eddie Staver's. I'll leave it to you to determine whether your favorite moment of his is Sigismund's bone-chilling, extended shriek of "*Captivity!*" or his manic goading of Clothold ("I tried to kill you! *Twice!*"), or his

And there I go spoiling the surprises. Rest assured, though. The actor - like the show itself - has *dozens* of them in store.

For more information, visit (<http://www.prenzieplayers.com>).