

Shakes, the Clown: "The Compleat Wrks of Wllm Shakspr {abridged}," at the Clinton Showboat

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 25 June 2008 02:34

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Ryan Schabach is one of the cast members from the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's three-man comedy *The Compleat Wrks of Wllm Shakspr {abridged}*, and I haven't yet determined if he's (a) an exceptionally good actor, (b) completely out of his mind, or (c) both. I'm going with (c), but if other commitments weren't keeping me away from Clinton for the rest of the show's run, I'd be happy to see it again just to be sure.

This is not meant to undermine the work of co-stars Craig A. Miller and Joshua Estrada, who are sensational in this profoundly silly satiric revue. From the production's first minutes, though, when he and Estrada present their two-person *Romeo & Juliet*, Schabach all but explodes with unrestrained comic enthusiasm - shrieking, racing about, throwing himself to the ground, shrieking some more - and you naturally assume there'll be no way for him to *sustain*

all that energy. But, boy, does he

ever

. By

The Compleat Wrks

' finale, Schabach hasn't just delivered full-throated, maniacally inspired takes on Shakespeare, but looks ready and willing to take on the collective works of Ibsen, O'Neill, and Larry Shue, as well; if he's at all exhausted, he doesn't let it show.

After two hours of nearly continuous laughter, Friday's audience, in truth, might've been more worn out than the actor. Sharply, imaginatively directed by Meghan Hakes, *The Compleat Wrks* - written by Jess Borgeson, Adam Long, and Daniel Singer - is a series of blackout scenes parodying the Bard's output, and simultaneously celebrates and pokes sweetly vicious fun at the Bard; no text is too revered, and no conceit too ridiculous. Sketch revues of this ilk are, by nature, hit-or-miss affairs, yet in

The Compleat Wrks

,
not only do the hits heavily outweigh the misses, but even the
misses

are pretty damned smart. Though slightly half-baked, the idea to stage

Titus Andronicus

as a cooking show (with Miller, here, doing a Titus-as-Julia-Child) is pure gaga invention, and while you might roll your eyes at the thought of an

Othello

rap number, the lyrics are just funny enough - and this cast's white-boy deliveries are just awkward enough - to make you giggle, and giggle without embarrassment.

Certainly, Hakes' *cast* looks incapable of embarrassment. (There was a priceless moment on Friday when Estrada's Romeo gave Schabach's Juliet a quick peck on the lips, and Estrada responded to the audience's titters with, "Oh, get *over* it.") For those who've only seen him onstage as Nathan Detroit in last summer's

Guys & Dolls

and during his pre-show announcements as the Showboat's artistic director, Miller is a revelation. Though he's a vibrant broad comedian, he also has a sneakily offhanded comedy style that's sardonic and sincere in equal measure, and Miller's timing is impeccable; one of Friday's most raucous laughs came with his perfectly calibrated pause during an Act II introduction: "The play -

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

. The place - ... Denmark." (Miller adds a button to the gag with a quick, hysterical take to the crowd that says, "Yes, I

know

that was redundant. Shut up.")

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Estrada, in his second summer in Clinton, is such an empathetic and downright lovable presence that he gets his biggest laughs here merely by being himself; the actor is particularly hilarious when stalling for time after his cohorts - engaged in a frenzied chase around the theatre - leave him stranded. (His sheepish grins and nervously broken sentences give the impression of a man staving off an impending panic attack.) But there isn't a moment in *The Compleat Wrks*

when Estrada

isn't

in terrific form, and his extended death scenes - all three of them - are brilliantly sustained feats of joyful hamminess.

Yet both actors nearly end up playing straight man to the apoplectically lunatic Schabach, and that's as it should be - God knows what would happen with *another* performer of his intensity on-stage. At times, Schabach appears so wired that he suggests the secret love child of Sam Kinison and Bobcat Goldthwait, but you never recoil from him; trying on (enjoyably) hideous wigs and dialects, Schabach is dementedly yet

happily

aggressive. Yet it's also clear that his much-too-muchness is an act, as Schabach is remarkably subtle and even moving when delivering,

sans

irony, Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man" soliloquy, and his underplayed reactions to the others' scolding create a splendid running gag; whenever he slowly, dejectedly shuffled off-stage, Friday's crowd let out a sympathetic, heartfelt "

aw-w-w-w.

" ("Don't encourage him!" Estrada barked in mock outrage.)

Schabach, in *The Compleat Wrks of Wllm Shakspr {abridged}*, could easily have steamrolled over lesser actors, but to their enormous credit, Miller and Estrada never let it happen; the trio's marvelously committed, vanity-free portrayals are a thrill to behold. With its tireless clowning and superb directorial touches - I especially loved the deer head that sang "Rawhide" ... and no, I'm *not* kidding - the Showboat's latest is a deliriously nutty good time. It's Shakspr the way it was meant to be played.

For tickets, call (563) 242-6760.