

Overbooked: "The Learned Ladies," at Augustana College through February 8

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 02 February 2009 09:47



Set in 17th Century France, Augustana College's production of the Molière comedy *The Learned Ladies*

takes place in the salon of a Paris manor, and among the first things you notice about Adam Parboosingh's scenic design are the stacks of books standing five feet high from the floor. It's actually impossible

not

to notice them, as the (prop) books have been painted in a variety of bright colors that make them resemble oversize, rectangular Skittles, or perhaps the reading material for Belle's library in Disney's

Beauty & the Beast.

They're certainly eye-catching, but there's no way anyone could mistake them for, you know, *real*

books, and

The Learned Ladies

itself turns out to be a lot like them - deliberately artificial, kind of amusing, and, unfortunately, pretty much divorced from real-world experience.

To be fair, that seems to be part of director Donna McNider Hare's intention, and the show isn't much harmed by its unrealistic bent. (In a Molière farce, after all, we not only expect but not-so-secretly *want* outsize caricatures and comically convoluted plotting and a convenient *de us ex machina*

to tie everything up with a bow.) My problem with

The Learned Ladies

isn't its familiar trappings; it's that I didn't

buy

them. Augustana's production finds its cast portraying a series of period archetypes - the foppish dandy, the henpecked husband, the "enlightened" dingbat - but the actors don't appear to have been asked to play anything beyond what's right on the surface; you basically learn everything you need to know, and are

going

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to know, about the show's characters within their first lines of dialogue. And very few of the performers here seem to truly

believe

in their roles, even as one-dimensional constructs. Not that you can blame them - they're not playing people, they're playing

adjectives

: "foolish," "deluded," "love-struck," et cetera.



I found *The Learned Ladies* fitfully engaging yet mostly unsatisfying, but I'm betting it'd be a lot of fun to *read*, as Timothy Mooney's rhyme-scheme adaptation of the material - completed this past December - is really quite good. (And this from someone who is, by nature, averse to theatrical rhyme scheme.) Molière's comedy concerns the young, level-headed Henriette (Anna Dundek), whose love for the equally level-headed Clitandre (E.C. den Heijer) is pooh-poohed by the wannabe aesthetes of the play's title - Henriette's mother (Eliza Bockstahler), sister (Jen Altenbernd), and aunt (Liz Stigler) - all of whom would prefer that the girl devoted her energies toward literature, or at least the "literary" twit Trissotin (David Cocks). A satire on those who seek erudition at the expense of love and basic common sense, Molière's work is wonderfully sharp and clever, and many of Mooney's rhymes - several of which employ modern-era phraseology and demand modern-era delivery - are laugh-out-loud funny. Or, at least, they *would* be if so many of the characterizations here didn't nullify your laughter.

Most everyone, I think, recognizes that the easiest way to potentially kill a joke is to telegraph it with a look or an inflection that suggests, "Here comes the punchline ... !", and there's a disheartening amount of telegraphing going on in this *Learned Ladies*. Although the actors don't often aim their comedic payoffs directly at the audience, you're almost never unprepared about when A Punchline Is Coming; you're clued in with a pause or a smirk or a hand gesture that makes the gag a *fait accompli*

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but not necessarily an enjoyable one. And while several performers - especially Altenbernd, Rolf Koos, Ken Robinson, and Rob Sullivan - do manage to come off as *naturally* funny, nearly everyone else is reduced to obvious or excessive shtick. (The wicked-talented Cocks works so hard at "comically repellent" that he becomes almost tough to watch; it's like witnessing Oscar Wilde being played by Tim Curry's Frank-N-Furter.)



I don't think it's coincidental that the cast members are at their best here when at their most earnest. Jake Lange, with his nicely authoritative readings, gives a terrific performance as Henriette's sensible, friendly uncle, and Dundek and den Heijer are sweet, sincere, and refreshingly *human*, and receive appreciative, deserved laughs. (At Friday's performance, Dundek earned one of the evening's *biggest* laughs after Cocks' *faux*-poetic weirdo asked Henriette if he was boring her, and she replied no, as she wasn't really listening to him.)

But humanity doesn't often fit into the equation in this *Learned Ladies*. Even the great Ellen Dixon's costumes, with the title characters resembling doppelgängers of Cinderella's wicked stepsisters, feel cartoonish, and whenever the titular trio is directed to gasp and sigh and chatter over other actors' lines - which happens *incessantly* - the women seem more like malfunctioning robots than flesh-and-blood beings. (During these many moments, I found myself squeezing my hands into fists to avoid screaming, "Shut the hell up, already!") There are pleasures to be found in Augustana's latest, but few that extend beyond its surface; it's a book with a colorful cover and almost nothing inside.

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For tickets, call (309)794-7306.