

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00

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As with a person, sometimes you can fall immediately, madly, irrationally in love with a play. And I think I fell in love with author Charles Morey's *Laughing Stock* within its first two minutes, when artistic director Gordon Page (Don Hazen) introduced visiting actor Jack Morris (Alex Klimkewicz) to his venerated theatre in New Hampshire, and the young man took a moment to assess his surroundings before saying, incredulously, "It's a *barn*."

Yes, it was, and yes, it *is*. Currently being staged at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, *Laughing Stock* is a sweet-natured, occasionally farcical comedy about a summer company struggling to stage a repertory season without sufficient time, funds, or talent, and personally, I found its title a bit misleading - *Laughing 'Til You Cry Stock*, I thought, would've been much more appropriate.

I should add, however, that I might be in the minority on this one. Beginning with that opening meta-gag, director John VanDeWoestyne's production is almost absurdly chockablock with verbal, visual, inside, and way-inside theatre jokes, so many that the show almost has no choice but to alienate a sizeable portion of its audience; unless you instinctively understand why a summer theatre's decision to stage Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is a howler for the ages, you'll likely miss out on a bunch of Morey's most inspired bits. (Either that, or you'll be put off by them; at Thursday's opening-night performance, I was one of only a very few who roared when a veteran actor bemoaned companies that were only interested in producing "*Nonsense 5* and that *Plaid* thing.")

Yet if you've spent any time at all in a theatre, even as a patron, it would seem nearly impossible not to be charmed by Morey's alternately satirical and sentimental view of backstage life. A familiarity with the terrain will help, of course, as will familiarity with *Dracula*, *Hamlet*, and *Charley's Aunt*

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, the three shows that

*Laughing Stock*

's ensemble winds up wrestling with. But you don't need an M.F.A. to cackle when a pretentious director, here, opts to stage

*Charley's Aunt*

for psychological realism, or wince when an elderly actor keeps forgetting his lines (for understandable reason), or smile when a surprisingly poignant

*Hamlet*

reminds its participants that the play

*is*

the thing; Morey, the longtime artistic director of Salt Lake City's Pioneer Theatre Company, may be preaching to the choir, but for most of its 150-minute length, he delivers an exceptionally robust and entertaining sermon.



So does VanDeWoestyne. *Laughing Stock* features a goodly share of joyous, knockabout slapstick, and the scene in which three acting interns (Cory Holbrook, Lisa Pilgrim, and Greg O'Neill) attempt to navigate a ladder through a door, in particular, is a miracle of unforced hilarity. Yet here's nothing artificial about these slaphappy moments; VanDeWoestyne always ensures that the comic mayhem springs from *character*.

When Page's self-written, much-abbreviated

*Dracula*

presentation goes completely off the rails, the actors' and stagehands' attempts to overcome the escalating madness are appropriately harebrained, but the fondness you feel for these somewhat ridiculous theatre "professionals" prevents you from laughing

*at*

their plight. Like Morey, VanDeWoestyne clearly loves these hapless, hard-working souls. You feel his affection for them in the comfortable, relaxed staging of the company's initial meet-and-greet, and the beautiful quiet of Act I's fade-out, and the climactic farewell to the troops, but it's also there in the expansive delight his actors take in the frequently explosive silliness.

As the company manager with an obsessive hold on his office supplies, Tom Morrow somehow manages to appear utterly simultaneously level-headed and completely out of his mind; his introductory speech ("I'm a *man!* I have *pencils!*") left me giggling until my stomach hurt. Molly McLaughlin is powerfully funny as a deadpan director with mind-boggling improvisational techniques. ("You're a wildebeest!") And Nicholas Waldbusser, delivering eccentrically forceful readings that defy predictability, is riotous as an egocentric actor who refuses to be upstaged by

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*Dracula's* minimalist set design; his ideas on how the vampire can sneak up on Jonathan Harker unseen - employing the use of spare change and eye drops - lead to an absolutely hysterical throwaway gag.

Yet *Laughing Stock* is unusual in that each of its 14 roles has been three-dimensionally conceived; even the interns, who don't have as much stage time as you might want, exude ingratiating comic presence. Klimkewicz, his character perpetually dazed and amused by the goings-on, provides a series of marvelously deadpan asides, there are cheerful - and sometimes cheerfully *hostile* - contributions by Suzanne Rakestraw, Erin Williams, Bill Hudson, Renaud Haymon, Lynn Monge, and the priceless Richmond Hill veteran David Rash (in his 50th role at the theatre), and Don Hazen is an exceptionally smooth and gracious ringleader, and oftentimes a more slippery eel than his protagonist role might suggest. (Initially planning a production of *King Lear*, Page tries to convince a wealthy sponsor to donate money by insisting that the Bard's tragic play is "very uplifting.")



Neither *Laughing Stock's* opening-night performance nor *Laughing Stock* itself was flawless. On Thursday, several actors still seemed shaky with their lines and cues - and, despite the play's intentionally amateurish bent, not on *purpose* - and there was one truly bizarre bit of staging, when cast members choreographed some *Charley's Aunt* slapstick involving a tea set and demonstrated it while standing in a circle, so that you couldn't view the routine no matter *where* in the Barn you sat. (This might've made sense if the bit was reproduced later in the show, but it wasn't.)

Morey's script, meanwhile, features one truly glaring problem: We never quite know whether or not *Laughing Stock's* theatre troupe is meant to be, you know, *talented*. The hideous *Dracula* blunders and Page's delusions of grandeur (*Peer Gynt* ?!?) would seem to suggest that the company is ridiculously inept and overreaching, but then they produce what we're told is a completely captivating *Hamlet* (even though the actors' readings don't sound noticeably stronger than they did in the

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*Dracula*

scenes). The author seems to want it both ways here, setting up the company's members to look foolish only to surprise us with how

*not*

-foolish they are, but the joke, if it

*is*

one, doesn't play.

But in a show that provides so much pleasure - even the overly sentimental detours are hearteningly earnest - this is mere quibbling. And even if it wasn't, Richmond Hill's latest still offers the sorts of magnificently funny moments that can keep you chuckling for *months*; I wouldn't dream of giving away the joke involving the Count's winged trajectory from one side of the stage to the other, but suffice it to say that I may never view the use of a theatre's fly system in quite the same way. (Bravas to technical director Jennifer Kingry and scenic designer Angela Rathman for the gut-bustingly outrageous

*Dracula*

environs.) Even at its messiest,

*Laughing Stock*

is a theatre-lover's nirvana.

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