

Bughouse: "The Wasps," at Lincoln Park through August 7

Written by Thom White

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It's not easy for me to review Genesisius Guild's *The Wasps*, as this comedy does not rely on quality acting, the focus of most of my reviews. (In truth, the actors who don't try to be hilarious and don't attempt great acting here are more successful at being funny than the few that do.)

Don Wooten's direction also doesn't matter as much for

The Wasps

as directing would in, say,

King Lear

. As was stated in the pre-show speech, this is sort of the Guild's end-of-summer party, with the audience invited to watch the actors intentionally make fools of themselves. And happily, this party is utterly ridiculous and, at times, raucously funny, and elicited waves of laughter through Saturday night's crowd.

As is Genesisius Guild tradition, Wooten, who also serves as playwright, has updated Aristophanes' comedy with modern and local references. The original script satirically focuses on the Athenian jury system and how it provided Athens' demagogue, Cleon, with his political power. A Cleon hater, Phobokleon tasks his two servants with preventing his father, Philokleon, from escaping their home and returning to the wasps – which, in Wooten's script, are a group of elderly fiscal conservatives who admire right-wing commentators, exemplified by the Wooten-written line, "We haven't heard today's sound bite, so we don't know what to think."

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There are few impressions of celebrities and politicians in this year's work. But there are the usual pointed references to current headlines – such as air-traffic controllers sleeping on the job, the current debt-ceiling debate, and construction on Quad Cities bridges (a female character insists this summer's construction schedule must have been put together by a man) – plus the traditional mentions of other local theatre companies. ("No foul words! This isn't the Curtainbox Theatre!")

Wooten also mixes in songs and dances, sometimes even at the same time, throughout the show. The routines are unpolished and the choreography not that difficult, but that's what's charming about the numbers; in truth, the sloppiness of the entire performance of *The Wasps* is a significant part of its appeal. The actors are simply having fun, and their joviality is infectious.

The comedy's songs are sardonic and not necessarily well-voiced, but no less enjoyable for the quality of singing. Sue Staley received lots of laughs for her song about standard accounting practices, which is far funnier than that theme would suggest. James Alt's solo when portraying Weenie (former Representative Anthony Weiner) is populated with particularly clever lyrics. ("The news men all tittered when they saw what I Twittered without my bathrobe on.") The biggest crowd-pleaser, however, was a number performed by a group called the Artsy Bunch – touring actors begging for funding for the arts. The chorus of their song, performed to the tune "Oh Susannah," got laughs each time it was repeated. ("Wandering artists, traveling through the sticks, oh we come from New York City with some culture for you hicks.")

There are a few uncomfortable moments, though, marked by what some might consider inappropriate humor. The script includes two gay jokes, both of which rely on clichéd stereotypes rather than sharp wit, and while I'm all for nothing being sacred in comedy, I expect something more intelligent from Genesius Guild than a character's swishy stance while referring to "them," or a man in bad drag being directed to the Rainbow District. There's also a reference to another local theatre reviewer and the need to explain things to her, since she probably won't understand the show. The line drew groans from the audience, which seemed to be a mix of delighted "oh no you *didn't*" and distressed "you shouldn't have" sentiments. (The joke fell on the side of laughing *at*, rather than laughing *with*, the reviewer, who was sitting in the front row for Saturday's performance.)

For the most part, however, Wooten's *The Wasps* is filled with witty, sometimes piercing humor wrapped in a production that no one would consider high art, and that's the point – this is Genesius Guild's chance to let loose. Seeing actors who have previously portrayed far more serious characters this summer hoofing it in a silly song-and-dance is itself a joke, and one that I wouldn't mind hearing again before *The*

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Wasps'
run is done.

For information, visit Genesius.org .