Written by Thom White
Monday, 30 July 2012 06:00

Since first experiencing one of Genesius Guild's end-of-season comedies two summers ago, I've eagerly anticipated playwright/director Don Wooten's witty work each subsequent year. His sharp, humorous, sometimes biting rewrites of Aristophanes comedies abound with political, pop-culture, and theatre references at the local and national levels. And while I've not had the honor of being personally referenced in one of his jokes – at least not while I was present – this year's *The Frogs* features hilariously pointed jabs at almost every theatre company in the Quad Cities area, with Saturday's performance the funniest of the three annual Guild spoofs I've yet seen.

If memory serves, Wooten's *The Frogs* also incorporates more of its Greek inspiration's plot than past productions have of theirs. Bryan Woods assumes the lead as a haughty, sharp-tongued Dionysos, introducing himself in a song performed to the tune of *Man of La Mancha*'s "I, Don Quixote" – here changed to "I, Dionysos" – during which the god asks, "What am I doing out here in Rock Island?" (Adding that "Something's gone terribly wrong," he insists that he "should be headlining the Mark.") He's accompanied by Xanthias, referred to – in a nod to Circa '21 – as a "Bootlegger reject," and played with gleeful humor by Neil Friberg (whose performances, in multiple roles, in Augustana College's 2011 *Metamorphoses* I may never forget). Together, they set out for Hades on a quest to retrieve Tyler Henning's over-confident Euripides, in order to return the tragedian's unequaled writing skills to Athens.

To get into Hades, the two first seek advice from Michael Carron's long-absent Herakles (who, at first, they think is "either dead, or has shipped out on the Clinton Showboat"), and end up, at separate times, disguising themselves as the strong man by borrowing the hero's lion skin and his large, red, plastic baseball bat. Advising Dionysos and Xanthias that the surest path to Hell is to "say something nice about Obama," Herakles then tells the duo that they must travel with Charon across the river Styx; after arguing over the pronunciation of the boatman's name – and whether the figure should be classified as a boatman or a boat*person* – Melanie Radkiewicz arrives in the role … wearing a beard. (When asked if Charon is a man or a woman, Radkiewicz replies, "I don't know the difference. I'm a Prenzie Player.")

While on the boat, an army of frogs sings and dances, giving designer Ellen Dixon the chance to display her cleverest costumes in the production: tunics in a '70s-style pattern of green, white, and black squares and circles, and frog-head hats and webbed hands apparently made

of poster-board. And once in Hell, Dionysos and Xanthias encounter the Initiates, a group of monsters that include a vampire, a mummy, and an attention-grabbing, laughter-inducing, post-lobotomy Frankenstein played by Scott Tunnicliff. (Seriously, his hilarious characterization is worth keeping an eye on during the entire scene, while Amanda Wales, as group leader Vampira, lends her role a beautiful solo voice during the Initiates' number, set to the tune of *The Munsters*
' theme.)

After proving themselves gods in a contest of pain tolerance, the two travelers enjoy a huge dinner and tussle in a large fight – neither activity of which is staged, but rather described by Earl Strupp's Tragic Messenger, who explains that these scenes would be too expensive to depict. (Strupp presents his monologue with a humorous, uppity-actor air, and on Saturday, earned the evening's loudest applause.) In order for Euripides to be freed, the writer must then take part in a poetry contest – vying for "the chance to do Elvis Presley impersonations at ComedySportz" – alongside another tragic poet, Aeschylus, played with a funny, sort of dumbfounded modesty by Pat Flaherty.

As usual, Wooten's comedy ends with a chase in which the play's characters run after each other across the stage, frequently stopping to jump in this weird way – knees and elbows out, jazz hands up – that makes me giggle every time I see it. It's an amusingly ridiculous end to an evening of sharp humor, with *The Frogs* an excellent way to let loose and have fun at the end of Genesius Guild's summer season.

The Frogs *runs at Lincoln Park (11th Avenue and 38th Street, Rock Island) through August 5, and information is available by visiting* *Genesius.org* .