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Theater review: "Rhinoceros" at UVa's Helms Theatre

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By: CLARE AUKOFFER | Daily Progress theater reviewer
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Syllogism: Life is absurd. Theater is part of life.
Therefore, theater is absurd.

It's this kind of logic that can be heard discussed with deep and silly seriousness in Eugene Ionesco's 1959 play "Rhinoceros," in which an entire French town transforms into a herd of rhinos. The University of Virginia Department of Drama's take on the play, well directed by Marianne Kubic, opened in the Helms theater on Thursday.

The label "Theater of the Absurd" came to mean plays based on the idea that life has no inherent meaning. Beyond that, absurdist plays can take many forms, depending on playwright, director, actors and audiences.

Which means that performances of Absurdist plays are like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're going to get.

With this production, Kubic and a cast of fine young actors have pulled out some tasty entertainment.

In many ways, this play is perfect for university theater; discussions heard in the first act are not unlike deadly serious discussions that really happen among students, often enhanced by herbs or similar substances. With this production, no enhancement is necessary — it's built in.

The play revolves and evolves around Berenger, a usually drunk, perpetually late Everyman sort of character, far from perfect but devoted to maintaining his individuality. This is a tough role, well and very physically performed here by second-year master of fine art student Brad Fraizer. Fraizer is very funny but also creates a real person within the caricature the script provides.

His foil — Berenger's best friend, Jean — is a fussy sort of man determined to do things right and set his friend straight. Mike Long, also a second-year MFA student, is delightfully prissy and self-satisfied as Jean. Both men have invested both skill and talent into creating characters that work.

Both men also have their female parallel characters. Ameree Cluff, as Daisy, Berenger's love interest, has created a real character in this unreal universe, and Sandi Carroll very easily could be a female Jean.

All of the acting in the show is a testament to focus and harder work than the audience might think.

Absurdist plays really are tricky; a bad production can be a worse headache than turning into a rhinoceros apparently is, and equally lumbering and cumbersome.

Related

"Rhinoceros"

University of Virginia Department of Drama

8 tonight, Saturday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday

Helms Theatre

www.artsboxoffice.virginia.edu

\$14, \$12 and \$8

924-3376

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But here, Kubik has worked so well with this company, within a concept of making it fast and making it funny, that this would be a good production even for someone who's never seen Absurdist theater.

It's fast paced and physical and funny. Though the first act is more fun than the second, the second bears the weight of Ionesco's message of conformity.

Kubic has involved her designers as much as her actors. Kathryn Springmann's set design, and the set changes, are worked into the whole of the play, rather than acting as accessories, and the same is true of Jonathan Hunter's lights. Sarah Bryan's costumes nicely define the characters — in the second act, quite literally.

Michael Rasbury's sound design is spectacular, with surround sound and sound moving from one side of the theater to the other.

This is a very good show, but it is Ionesco. The way to handle Absurdist theater is to avoid trying to make sense of it as you watch. Just go with it. The whole point is that there's really not a lot to figure out.

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