

Wednesday, April 22, 2015

Curtain call

MSU's "Hair" and Ixion's "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds"by *City Pulse*

Ageless Aquarius

MSU's production of 'Hair' still feels edgy, relevant

It's been nearly 50 years since the dawning of the "age of Aquarius," and yet the rock-musical "Hair" still resonates. The Vietnam War is over and LSD Review is illegal, but "Hair" is a vivid time capsule that blends the fears and passions of a generation with a killer soundtrack.

For its part, MSU Department of Theatre's production captures the energy and musicality of this turbulent time. Set in New York in 1968, "Hair" loosely follows the journey of a hippie tribe. There's lots of singing, simulated sex, songs about sex juxtaposed with anti-war slogans, horoscope readings and calls to burn draft cards.

The plot follows the personal journeys of a few tribe members, most notably Berger (Joshua Whitson) — the cultish, charismatic leader of the clan — and Claude (Jacob Covert) — a fresh faced newbie forced to make tough decisions. For audiences looking for structure and cohesion, "Hair" is not that show. Stories and songs overlap and interweave like the writhing bodies beautifully choreographed by Kellyn Uhl.

By far, the best aspects of this production are the music and dancing. The musical spawned a rich array of '60s rock standards like "Aquarius," "Good Morning Starshine," and, of course, "Hair." Music director Dave Wendelberger leads the tight orchestra, who credibly add the rock to the "rock musical." Though never a guarantee for a student musical, the entire cast has strong voices that hold their own individually and blend blissfully, especially on the opening song, "Aquarius."

Historical context is crucial to the production and enjoyment of this play. Director Deric McNish thankfully avoids arbitrarily "updating" the show, keeping the action in its original 1968 setting. The performances are still broad and physically flamboyant, but they feel like honest reactions to the terrifying realities of war rather than clownish caricatures of hippies.

The biggest problem in the production is poor diction. This, combined with the Pasant Theatre's cavernous space, means that many of the lyrics and crucial dialogue are often lost in a sea of sound, regardless of body microphones. Audiences who know the show should have no problems, but first time audiences may have trouble following what little story there is.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is how edgy and relevant "Hair" still feels. The dialogue is crude and the characters are irreverent and disrespectful to authority — and in East Lansing that still feels dangerous. The full nude scene at the end of Act 1 still makes a defiant statement. For all that's changed, we're still at war, there's a stark political divide, and people today still don't trust the government. "Hair" may not be an LSD escape, but it's a welcome — and legal — musical trip.

—Paul Wozniak

"Hair"

MSU Department of Theatre 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 22 & Thursday, April 23; 8 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. Friday, April 24; 8 p.m. Saturday, April 25; 2 p.m. Sunday, April 26 (Post-show discussion on Thursday, April 23) \$20/\$18 seniors and faculty/\$15 students Pasant Theatre, Wharton Center, 750 E. Shaw Lane, East Lansing (517) 432-2000, whartoncenter.com

Discomfort zone

Ixion Theatre's 'Gamma Rays' effectively disquieting

We toss around the phrase "dysfunctional family" casually in conversation, as if we, and everyone else, know exactly what we mean. But unless you have lived as a teenager in the home of a down-and-out, bitter single mother who is a mean drunk and bat-shit crazy, you have no idea.

Those of us with day jobs that invite these families in for psychological repair get some dark glimpses of this, but sometimes it takes an evening of powerful theater to really drive the message home.

"The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds," presented at AA Creative Corridor by Jeff Croff's Ixion Theatre, overcomes the storefront-space limitations to create a comfort-zone-shredding production. A production that forces one to contemplate whether a child can overcome the bleakness of a mother who hates the world so much that she anesthetizes a pet rabbit to express her rage at the trauma of her own troubled adolescence.

P.K. Van Voorhees plays the mother, Beatrice — also known in high school as Betty the Loon — a disheveled hunk of hardscrabble snarls and acidic parenting. Van Voorhees looks and feels the part as she shuffles and shrieks across the stage, sipping from a vodka bottle and spouting cruel and unusual verbal abuse at both of her teenaged daughters.

Kaleel Van Voorhees, the real-life daughter of P.K. Van Voorhees, plays Matilda, who goes by Tillie. Tillie is the pathologically shy but bright young science fair star at her local high school — a sin for which her mother shall not forgive her. Kaleel Van Voorhees is deadpan and unemotional, absorbing emotional blows without a single wince, yet it is clear that Tilly is hurt by all of this.

Grace Hinkley plays the older sister Ruth, all dressy and sophisticated and yet, because of occasional epilepsy, possessing teenage issues of her own.

The theatrical dynamics of these three women, the mother/daughters triangle, is a thrill to watch. Each of the three actors carve out a unique energy level that differentiates one from another.

Not to be outdone, Judith Evans — in the minor role of Nanny, a walker-assisted likely stroke victim with no lines— is painfully accurate as a lost soul ravaged by dementia.

One does not expect, in a simple storefront venue like this, to be stirred emotionally. Ixion has pulled off a minor miracle here.

Is there is a gamma ray of hope in this play? That somehow Tillie will rise out of the depths of her mother's evilly inflicted trauma and break the cycle of verbal and

emotional abuse so accurately and painfully presented? One. Can. Hope.

—Tom Helma

“The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds.”

Ixion Theatre 8 p.m. Saturday, April 25; 7 p.m. Sunday, April 26. \$15. AA Creative Corridor, 1133 S. Washington Ave., Lansing. (517) 775-4246, ixiontheatre.com

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