

Arts & Culture

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THEATER

The Play's a thing of comedic beauty

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Like everyone else, the arts enjoy talking about themselves. How many movies have plots related to making movies? In theater, the backstage comedy is a staple. The tradition goes back a long way, and Silver Spring Stage's lively production of *The Play's the Thing* shows us that even a story from over a century ago can still make this idea seem fresh and funny.

Ferenc Molnar's comedy (adapted and updated by P. G. Wodehouse) deals with two collaborating playwrights, Turai and Mansky. Except it really isn't about them – the two men have written an operetta and a young composer named Albert has written the music. Except it isn't about him – Albert is in love with prima donna Ilona, and the men overhear Ilona next door with a former suitor Almady. Is Ilona cheating on her betrothed? How can they get themselves out of this fix? Turai may have a plan.

Except it isn't about that either. Molnar seems to be fascinated by the whole mechanics of writing a play. The play starts with Turai musing with "how hard it is to begin a play" and answering that question gets the evening started. Act II ends several times as Turai tries to figure out the best

way to end a second act. This sets everything up for the funniest scene of the script – the play within a play in the final act that is a hilarious disaster and serves many other functions as well.

This is an artificial script by a playwright fully aware how artificial it is. Director Pauline Griller-Mitchell understands that as well. Mitchell and her cast play it straight at times but shift into a delightful affected stance when needed. Anne Vandercock as Ilona and Rich Amada as Almady play the ex-lovers well but then do this wonderfully over the top performance in the third act play. It takes good actors to act this badly when needed, and Amada is especially good shifting back and forth between modes.

But Brandon Mitchell is good as the moody young lover Albert. And the two writers are played well by Craig Miller as the more exasperated and pessimistic Mansky while Jeffrey Westlake is the more urbane and inventive Turai. Their musings on the craft of theater adds yet another layer of artifice to the proceedings. But remember, this was adapted by P. G. Wodehouse, and it

is only fitting that the creator of Jeeves would make the hotel help the scene stealers. So we have with Chris Mancuni's overly eager Mell and John Barclay Burns' slow moving but often quick-witted Dvornitschek.

Like most farces, the best moments are the side paths the script takes. There are great swipes at critics (hey!) and musing on writing in general ("That's the great thing about French literature – there is so much of it"). We learn about why Fridays are better/worse than Tuesdays, how many castles one should own and how a jilted lover should react. Or at least overreact.

Molnar wrote his play at a high water mark in Hungarian drama. Wodehouse updated the work to look wistfully back at a time destroyed by two World Wars. These were artificial times and perhaps an artificial comic farce

was just the thing. *The Play's The Thing* is merely a bauble, but a very charming bauble when you think about it.

The Play's the Thing continues at Silver Spring Stage through Oct. 22. For more information, call (301) 593-6036.

JJ Kaczynski as Charlie Baker, Ben Shovlin as Ellard Simms, Field Blauvelt as "Froggy" LeSueur, Rusty Clauss as Betty Meeks, and Lindsay Haynes as Catherine Simms.

PHOTO BY STAN BAROUH



The Play's the Thing
Silver Spring Stage
★★★

If you're into it, *War* can be fun

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

It is less than a month before crucial mid-term elections and Woolly Mammoth has that clearly in mind by hosting the Texas-based group Rude Mechs for their adaptation of *Get Your War On*.

This comic strip by David Rees – actually freeware clip art of office scenes with snappy captions added – is an extended editorial cartoon. The more to the left you lean, the more famous this Internet based comic script is. The more conservative you are, the more infamous this strip is. *War* has been knocking the whole War on Terror, and the Iraqi War in particular long before it became fashionable to do so.

So let's ignore the political aspect of the performance for a moment, though it is so integral to the show. Is it any good? It is amazing how the five-member cast takes

these short strips and fit them together to create a show that does not feel too choppy. Director Shawn Sides keeps everything moving nicely, and retains the low tech aspect of the strip throughout this adaptation.

The set is merely a row of tables and five overhead projectors. A lot of the visuals are the clipart office pictures, but the cast does all sorts of imaginative things with those pictures. A photo of a plane starts on one end of the row of projectors and eventually "lands" on the aircraft carrier in the last projector. Photos of world leaders at their least attractive pop up on the screen (Henry Kissinger comes off particularly bad here), and some of the most bonehead quotes get flashed before our eyes.

Skits are acted out in brief vignettes, and the production goes for anything. An opening monologue is really funny if you know what the

Cato Institute is. There are flashbacks to the 1980s that seems to be political commentary with bad '60s

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op-art designs and odd '70s dance moves. People get wheeled around on chairs, the ELO song "Telephone Line" gets worked over and there is even a cameo appearance by North Korea – the entire country.

Let me mention the five actors, who give this show boundless energy with the quick sketch comedy pizzazz a production like this demands: Lana Lesley, Jason Liebrecht, Kirk Lynn, Amy Miley and Chad Nichols. These five wear any number of hats and personify any number of people (real and imaginary) over the course of the show. At its best, there are reminders of what Saturday Night Live was like in its heyday.

On one hand, *War* is a great treasure trove of what has happened in a very eventful half decade. Remember the anthrax scare? There are several comments on that. How about freedom fries? As one cast member notes "they're renaming cafeteria food... remember these are adults." We get reminders of Terry Schiavo, John Ashcroft and even that weird controversy over the B.C. comic strip that some thought was a slap at Islam. And some of us thought it was going to be boring after Clinton left office.

On the other hand, this presen-

tation has a definite political slant and makes no apology for it. Certain four letter words are freely spoken (they are even tracked at one point) and the humor goes from playful to viciously sarcastic. One problem with both the left and the right is that both extremes can get pretty nasty at times, and *War* does not totally avoid that pitfall.

So in many ways *Get Your War On* is preaching to the choir, but members of that choir are going to enjoy the show a lot. However, this is an hour and 15 minutes of political humor that doesn't mention former Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) once. Finally something both sides can enjoy.

Get Your War On continues at Woolly Mammoth through Oct. 14. For more information, call (202) 393-3939.

Get Your War on
Woolly Mammoth Theatre
Company
★★★