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by Bond H

Entering the Bad, Bold World of Burlesque

Whoever you are, Shine: A Burlesque Musical will make you laugh at yourself. First it will make fun of prudes. It will point and laugh at stereotypical business men who are made squeamish by loose women and homosexual men. Then it will roll its eyes at precocious graduate students with no real marketable skills. And, of course, it scoffs at monogamy by ignoring it all together. It berates "easy breezy" Broadway love songs – accusing them of using all the right registers to drug listeners into thinking love can last forever. Finally, pants, financial stability, conventional talent, popularity, marketing, commercial enterprise and pop princess-packaged sexuality are also mocked repeatedly. And when you think everything has been torn down, and that there is nothing left to stand upon, to your surprise, you will find left intact a charming message about finding your community and identity –wherever it may be – and sticking to it.

It may sound trite for those looking for an edgy or more profound Burlesque exercise. But as a first-timer (the closest I've come to burlesque is at a variety show that unexpectedly invaded a Mediterranean restaurant where I was eating dinner), I found some pretty useful themes in this musical about a vaudeville theatre that sits on the precipice of gentrification.

With the bank breathing down her neck, alcoholic and stubborn Shine Meonne must walk the line of "selling out" or foreclosing on the theatre that has always been her home, history and future. A mother-figure of sorts, Shine leads a troupe of Burlesque performers, including divas, outcasts, prima donnas, darlings, queers and one character, both creepy and adorable, named "Feral" (Roxie Moxie). In a desperate attempt to not lose everything, Shine hires a producer and starts a slow, stubborn shuffle into the world of mainstream success and, in turn, creative compromise. The entire theatre, is in fact, challenged to find a way to do what they love to do – but do it better.

One of the most touching moments in the play is when Shine (played by Cass King, also a co-writer of the show), on the brink of giving up, sings "Perversions of Yesteryear," a song about how the Internet has nearly erased a time and a culture when people had to leave their computer desks and talk to people to seek out a thrill. Inga Ingenue's choreography beautifully opens this number with chorus members acrobatically riding mimed bicycles (with other dancers acting as the cycles) – and then acting out an entire slideshow of freeze-frame scenes that depict a whole world of sexual interaction, now eclipsed by high speed Internet access and manual autonomy. Sexual perversions threatened by lack of social skills as a sign of community dying in our desensitized times? I'd never thought of it that way.

Of course, all of this is couched in a message that's more about loving yourself – in whatever shape you come in – than it is about encouraging sexual deviancy. In fact, it just sort of takes for granted that everyone is a little bit perverted – and it shows us how in a safe community, where friends back you up and newcomers keep an open mind: there's less room for the abuse or despair that can come about when healthy sexual activity is stigmatized and marginalized.

I can see how this isn't a new or exciting message for those versed in good Burlesque. But those types should get over it and be entertained by the well-written songs and creative staging of this sharp show. And for newcomers like me – take this as a great opportunity to get introduced to Burlesque: the pun-tastic vaudeville humor, the shameless celebration of the everyday human

body, the fabulous costumes and the refreshing perspective that MTV and magazines don't have the monopoly on "sexy" – unless you let them.

Other highlights: a costume that combines a porcupine disguise, a ukulele and another surprise; Adra Boo Green's stellar voice; Roxie Moxie's hair; and Mark Waldstein's bold performance as "Mr. Suit."

Original article at:

http://www.cityartsmagazine.com/blog/2010/07/theatre-review-entering-bad-bold-world-burlesque