

Review: “Big Love”

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By Paul Wozniak for the Lansing City Pulse Newspaper

Til death do they part

Small moments make a big impact in Peppermint Creek’s ‘Big Love’



“Big Love,” per its title, is big; conceptually, thematically, physically and sonically. But Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.’s most effective moments are small, from wry one-liners to subtly raised eyebrows. For director Lynn Lammers and the cast, the biggest challenge is making the big resonate with audiences as much as the small does.

Contextually, Charles Mee’s script is meant to be enormous (albeit with a condensed cast of 11). The story of 50 runaway brides seeking asylum from their future owners ... er, husbands ... was adapted from

the Ancient Greek play “The Suppliants,” written by Aeschylus. The Greeks would have performed in an outdoor arena with masks the size of opened pizza boxes doubling as megaphones. In this production, the actors sing songs such as “You Don’t Own Me” while smashing wrapped wedding presents on the stage. But actors also smash their bodies on the stage, punctuating entire scenes with aerobic intensity.

Mee updates setting and dialogue, pierced with universal sentiments such as “true love has no conditions; that’s why it’s so awful to fall in love.” Characters grandstand with heady monologues ranging from societal pressures to gender inequalities along with additional moral quandaries. Mee offers no easy answers. By giving each side a moment of honest disclosure, Mee complicates his characters enough to avoid quick labels of “good” or “evil.” But the politically charged rants that dominate the dialogue are difficult for audiences to receive as they are for actors to deliver.

As the most outspoken of the brides, Thyona (Amy Winchell) is given the bulk of the righteous sermonizing. Winchell definitely has the chops to deliver back-to-back intense monologues demonizing Adam and praising Eve, but her finest moment is the scorching insults she delivers to her sisters. The main recipient of those insults is Olympia, played by Amanda Harvey. Unlike Thyona, Olympia is the daft youngling who speaks in rambling non-sequiturs. Harvey’s comic timing is masterful and a welcome encounter to the play’s serious side. Meghan Malusek plays Lydia, the third bride. Malusek works wonderfully between Winchell and Harvey while displaying realistic chemistry with her suitor, Nikos (Brennan Hattaway).

Keenan Kangas plays the dominant suitor, Constantine, the perfect headstrong match to Thyona. Kangas struggles to make Constantine feel authentic, but seems to make a real connection during his especially physical monologue. Zach Neithercut plays the final suitor Oed (pronounced “Ed”), bringing a spark to an especially small role.

The two strongest performances come from Blake Bown (Piero, the host of the home where the brides seek refuge) and Shannon Bowen (Eleanor, one of the guests). Piero treads a fine political line between two principled sides. His dialogue may be sharp, but his performance — seasoned with dry delivery, deadpan stares and wicked smiles — absolutely kills. Shannon Bowen brings a bubbly exuberance to Eleanor’s dippy persona that draws the biggest laughs in the most inappropriate ways.

Despite its crisp 90-minute runtime, “Big Love” lumbers due to unevenness. For all the pithy remarks and quotable truths, there’s heavy-handed lecturing delivered with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Provided they’re still relating after the impact, audiences will leave with plenty to discuss.