

Wednesday, January 28, 2015

Curtain call: Love, death and puppets

Puppets deliver surprising tenderness in ‘Or You Could Kiss Me’

by [Mary C. Cusack](#)

The online description of Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.’s current production, "Or You Could Kiss Me," accurately sums up its storyline about an aging couple who grapple with the impending death of one partner. What it doesn't tell you is that there are puppets involved.

Set in the year 2036, the play uses a mix of live actors, who play the couple in the present, and two pairs of puppets that represent the couple in their past and future, respectively. Mr. A (played Jeff Beorger) and Mr. B (played by Bill Henson) use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of their same-sex relationship, even decades after everyone has stopped judging or caring. They have been together for 67 years, but Mr. B is terminally ill and Mr. A, the more submissive of the two, must decide if he can or should push Mr. B to formalize the relationship in some way in order to preserve his rights to their estate. At the same time, Mr. B is fighting to retain his memory and identity.

Integrating puppets with human actors in a live performance is a risky endeavor. Executed poorly, the effect can pull an audience out of the enchantment of the story. In worst-case scenarios, the results can approach "Waiting for Guffman" levels of laughability.

Within moments of the puppets' first appearance on the stage, such fears are dismissed. The puppets are carefully manipulated by their human counterparts, aided by four anonymous Assistants (Michael Banghart, Keenan Kangas, Jordan Climie, Danny Bethea). The Assistants are not meant to be hidden in the shadows, but are active cast members in a hybrid of roles. They give voice to Mr. A and Mr. B's subconscious, make observations and prod for truth like a Greek chorus.



Their most vital role, however, is to imbue the simple puppets with life and personality. The Assistants are extremely skilled, creating hope and heartbreak with the most subtle of movements. Two lifetimes of love and loss are summed up by one hand caressing another, or a head dropped ever so slightly.

The puppets seem primitive at first, but the designs are rife with symbolism. The octogenarian puppets are little more than sticks, appropriate representations of men wizened by time and gravity. The vibrancy of their youth is reflected in larger puppets who sport washboard abs and thick arms. The scene in which they meet while swimming in the ocean is truly transporting.

Handily directed by Scott Crandall, "Or You Could Kiss Me" is a moving and poignant commentary on fear, the debilitating effects of aging and the process of dying. It is also an effective reminder of the enduring power of love, delivered by puppets with a surprisingly deep human tenderness.

“Or You Could Kiss Me”

Peppermint Creek Theatre Company 8 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29, Friday, Jan. 30 & Saturday Jan. 31 2 p.m. Sunday
\$16/\$11 students & seniors Miller Performing Arts Center 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing 517-927-3016, peppermintcreek.org