

Review of “Lord of the Flies”

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Lady of the flies *Gender-swapped play prompts* *discussion, causes confusion*

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.’s latest production, “Lord of the Flies,” is most notable for its lack of lords. The entire cast of this play is female. Directors Sally Hecksel and Devin Faught, working from Nigel Williams’ stage version of William Golding’s classic novel, took the story in new directions with its genderswapped adaptation. The result was a “Lord of the Flies” that often did fly.



Hecksel’s note in the program suggested their all-female “Lord of the Flies” encouraged a discussion of feminism. Unfortunately, I came away talking about this deviation’s awkwardness, not about any messages of empowerment or equality.

The unsettling Golding version many of us endured as required reading in high school is, forgive the expression, a textbook example of symbolism. Peppermint Creek’s version certainly adhered to the conch shell’s reflection of order, Piggy’s glasses as representation of both intellect and weakness and “the Beast” as an image of savagery. But the “Lord of the Flies” I saw inside the Miller Performing Arts Center also had infusions of techno music, two incongruous, beat-driven dances, an ambiguous time setting and some confusing gender identification.

The female cast kept the book’s male names. There were hints of modernism, yet the clothing and story seemed suited for Golding’s 1960s setting. Other elements also strayed from the original’s image. The Piggy character was not flabby, even though he/she was still called that. Half the cast of “kids” was old enough to earn college degrees. The young-looking and talented Celia Spink was a noticeable exception in the mostly-too-mature-looking cast.

The audience was also asked to believe the spacious Miller stage was a tropical setting — with little more than some Michigan hunters’ camouflage draped over wooden platforms to suggest that. Fire, rain and an ocean had to be imagined with the assistance of audio cues — a burden ably handled by Frank Malusek. The forest was totally imaginary. A slab of ribs obviously still wrapped in clear plastic was used to represent a freshly slaughtered pig.

But there were also displays of very realistic blood and grime. The costumes — shrewdly made by Kathy Kettles — went through three remarkable and convincing transformations, ending in what was essentially scruffy underwear. Grotesque and credible make-up was expertly applied. A large shadow screen offered clever images that stimulated the imagination. British accents and endless dialogue were conquered.

Despite the play’s shortcomings, the cast managed to ooze emotion and captivate the audience. Monica Tanner as Ralph, Sally Hecksel as Piggy and Meghan Malusek as Jack needed no fancy set or authentic props to convey their individual mastery of the roles. Tanner tactfully took control of her tenuous territory, while Hecksel handily handled her honorable and helpless persona. Malusek managed to manipulate with mighty moves and magnificent meanness. The trio gave truly forceful performances.

Hannah Feuka, as Simon was a showstealing supporting actress. Her emotional and physical transformations, portraying a conflicted character with multiple personalities, was stunning.

There was no weak link in the rest of the ensemble, either. The entire gang gave energetic, highly physical and emotional performances that were unique and remarkable. The strength of these performance makes this version of “Lord of the Flies,” like Golding’s novel, required viewing — although perhaps only for adventurous local theater fans.