

What the &!*#'s going on at Howmet Playhouse?

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Jeremy Meier



Kim Harsch

WHITEHALL — If its 2009 opener is any indication, the annual Summer Theatre Festival at Howmet Playhouse here has matured enough to perform plays as they are written.

The historic venue for many summer-stock seasons has toned down the raunchier rhetoric of the scripts that it stages. Either eliminated or rephrased were any less than religious references to God (such as adding a suffix worthy of Rhett Butler), and a four-letter word for sexual intercourse, dropped as the F Bomb. The feeling was that verbatim vulgarities would offend the sensibilities of conservative West Michigan audiences.

So much for assumptions. Self-censorship has gone out the proverbial window as playwright David Ives' six-sketch comedy "All in the Timing" runs its three-performance course, through today, July 4, in the 400-seat Howmet auditorium.

The change in philosophy — damn the toning down, full text ahead — is especially evident in a playlet entitled "English Made Simple." The party conversation between a man and woman (Jeremy Meier and Andrea Mathews) is &!*@#! interpreted by an announcer (Kim Harsch) — identified as God herself — who speaks what the couple really means. Sizable crowds are howling at blunt exchanges that aren't grossing out anyone who's taken the trouble to grow a sense of humor.

As director Jeff Sanders moves things right along, "All in the Timing" is at its best at the beginnings of its two acts that collectively last just under the same couple hours.

Act I opens with rapid-fire exchanges between two strangers in the night (Harsch and Meier) who alter their come-ons each time a bell pings. Act II breaks from intermission with a New York restaurant scene in which two customers (Meier and Andrew Zahrt), abetted by hard-edged waitress (Hayley Clark), find their realities shifting in malaises named after some major American cities. The bit twists a contention of the Rolling Stones, concluding that you can't always get what you want unless you ask for what you don't.

Nicholas Dressel, Harsch and Zahrt have some fun with "Variations on the Death of Trotsky," in which Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky and his wife must come to terms with an ax that a Mexican assassin has

stuck into Trotsky's noodle. "Variations on the Death of Trotsky" also sustains Howmet Playhouse's reputation as a mecca for wig malfunction, leaving the impression, after several years, that these things are no more accidental than Janet Jackson's problems further down.

Other vignettes include one in which three monkeys named after famous authors (Jonathan Swift, John Milton, and Franz Kafka) try to type William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" even though they don't know what it is; and "Universal Language" where Meier and Clark establish gibberish as a cure for stuttering. The latter brings to mind 1950s satirist Tom Lehrer's holding that if people can't communicate, the very least they can do is shut up.

With both Muskegon and Cleveland taking comic lumps, "All in the Timing" is played out on designer Brad Dell's set of geometric shapes and sharp angles reflecting German Expressionism. Dell's tricked it out in orange and blue, with red accents that extend to the blinking eyes of a fake skull.

Oh, that Trotsky, he's a crafty one.

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