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Measure for Measure

Mustard Seed Theatre

Monday, April 14, 2008 10:08 AM CDT

Play: Measure for Measure

Group: Mustard Seed Theatre

Venue: Fontbonne University Fine Arts Building, 6800 Wydown

Dates: April 17,18,19,20,24,25,26,27

Tickets: \$15 and \$20; contact 314-719-8060 or www.mustardseedtheatre.com

Story: When the Duke of Vienna decides to temporarily vacate his office, he puts his cousin, the righteous Angelo, in charge. Unknown to all but a local friar, though, the Duke masquerades as a priest to observe closely how Angelo handles his duties. When young Claudio is found guilty of impregnating his lover, Juliette, he is sentenced to death by Angelo for the pre-marital assignation. Claudio's sister Isabella, a novice, implores Angelo to save her brother. He agrees on the condition that the virgin sleep with him. When the Duke learns of Angelo's hypocritical offer, and his subsequent plans to double-cross Isabella, he puts in motion his own elaborate scheme to reunite Angelo with the latter's long-spurned fiancée, Marianna, and -- sort of -- set everything right.



Highlights: A tale of justice and mercy, honesty and hypocrisy, faithfulness and betrayal, one of Shakespeare's lesser performed works is actually receiving its third local production in the last few months. As with the recent Clayton Community Theatre presentation, Mustard Seed Theatre adapts the Bard's tale to contemporary times in costumes and setting, even as the language remains the same.

Director Deanna Jent takes full advantage of the considerable talents of the major performers in her cast to make this version a rousing and riveting success. Particularly strong are Jason Cannon as the noble duke and Jim Butz as his highly-wound junior official. Butz makes clear the inner struggle felt by Angelo at the sight of the beautiful Isabella while also showing us how Angelo's moral inflexibility will not allow him to reconcile his emotions, leading to the emergence of his baser instincts.

Cannon's strengths with enunciation and interpretation allow us to follow the duke's machinations, well-intentioned if also Byzantine. Jennifer Theby brings a powerful and steady presence to Isabella, while Richard Strelinger offers the long work's best comic relief as the swaggering buffoon, Lucio.

Other Info: There's plenty of solid supporting work, including Sarah Cannon as Angelo's spurned fiancée, Marianna, particularly on an amusing karaoke spin to The Eagles' Desperado. Richard Lewis and Nancy Lewis are sure and steady as the sincere provost and the Duke's trusted advisor, Escalus, respectively. Donna Weinsting and Terry Meddows are amusing as the lusty madame Mistress Overdone and the nefarious tapster, while Joshua Carroll has a good moment in the truncated role of Elbow.

Rusty Gunther and Bess Moynihan nicely portray the young lovers, Claudio and Juliette, Wes Cannon is fine as the devout Friar Thomas and Alan David, Emily Immer, Ethan

Jones, Tim Norman, Rob Maesaka, Valleri Dillard and Andrea Smith fill out the cast. Dennis Seyer's set design symbolically places the duke's office on a second level above the common fray of street life, prison cells and bars, with lighting provided by Michael Sullivan. The costumes of Jane Sullivan and Marilyn Brooking accentuate the contemporary look, complemented by some amusing video work by Jesse Russell and judiciously selected tunes from sound designer Kareem Deanes that range from Leonard Cohen to Nickelback.

Although expertly trimmed to a more manageable length of two and a half hours, Jent's adaptation nonetheless drags noticeably in the second act and could benefit from accelerated pacing after the intermission. Still, it's a highly polished production of a play that often is difficult both to perform and understand.

Rating: A 4 on a scale of 1-to-5.

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