



The Harvard Crimson

ONLINE EDITION

Arts

F.U.D.G.E. Make 'Fool'ish Show Fun

F.U.D.G.E. Theatre Company's acting and directing save Neil Simon's Work

Published On 2/12/2009 7:29:11 PM

By **ALI R. LESKOWITZ**

Crimson Staff Writer

"I'm thinking," schoolteacher Leon Tolchinsky says.

Doctor Zubritsky, the hapless Kulyenchikov resident whose daughter Tolchinsky must educate, responds in earnest.

"What's it like?" he asks.

Strange as it may seem, Zubritsky's question is no joke. He inquires in all seriousness, with a note of wonder and curiosity, because he is incapable of thinking.

In Neil Simon's "Fools," performed with great enthusiasm by The F.U.D.G.E. Theatre Company at The Factory Theatre in Boston, the residents of an old Russian village called Kulyenchikov are forever condemned to a life of stupidity. Thanks to a 200-year-old curse, Kulyenchikov is a place where flowers are known as fish and fourteen sheep equal two dozen until Tolchinsky arrives and attempts to reverse this affliction of idiocy. While "Fools" is certainly not Simon's finest work, F.U.D.G.E.'s production balances the script's failing attempt at humor with wonderful, nuanced performances, charming creative vision, and a healthy dose of lighthearted fun.

Tolchinsky (Nate Johnson) must educate Sophia Zubritsky (Jamianne Devlin) in 24 hours or risk falling victim to the village's curse of stupidity. Unfortunately for Tolchinsky, he falls in love with the beautiful, but extremely dim-witted, Sophia. The lack of chemistry between Johnson and Devlin makes the asinine love story feel even more implausible than originally written, but the individual performances of the two actors easily compensate for this weakness.

Johnson is especially delightful, playing Tolchinsky with an endearing earnestness, a wry sense of humor, and a weary, yet acute awareness of his ludicrous situation. After his character fails his mission and becomes brainless, Johnson's entire physicality changes, making for some of the funniest non-spoken moments of the show. As the straight-faced man, Johnson may have the most difficult job in a play otherwise filled with absurd, broadly-played comedic characters, but he handles the portrayal with ease and a unique brand of wit and ingenuity.

Among the ridiculous and idiotic, Steven Dyer might have the flashier role with his over-the-top Count Gregor Yousekevitch, but it is the Zubritsky parents, Lenya (Dorothy Ahle) and the Doctor (Peter Cosmas Sofronas), who nearly steal the show. The two share an effortless rhythm and sharp comedic timing that help them pull off some of the more absurd one-liners and gags. All of the actors use convincing Russian accents throughout the show, transforming some throw-away lines into comedic gold based solely on delivery.

Director Joe DeMita's set design brings the audience into the Zubritsky's living room, with its goofy floral couch—where young Sophia learns how to sit down before our very eyes—and a door that transitions the other half of the stage into Kulyenchikov's marketplace. A balcony center stage allows for a comical sequence between Sophia and Tolchinsky that parodies "Romeo & Juliet." DeMita makes the most of the theatre's limited space, adding varying levels and colorful accents to keep the show visually dynamic. His lively directing takes advantage of the intimate, crammed stage, providing the audience with aesthetically appealing details from nearly every angle.

Less varied than the set, the light design by James Petty is nevertheless successful when it departs from the typical bright yellow glow of day used throughout most of the show. Tolchinsky's deadpan asides to the audience are lit by a single spotlight, later used to effectively highlight the lack of internal thought processes by the shepherdess Snetskaya (AnneMarie Alvarez). Rare moments of clarity or strong emotion—such as Sophia's wish to break free or Tolchinsky's recognition of his love for Sophia—are accentuated by soft blues and fiery reds.

DeMita keeps the show quickly paced, throwing gag after gag at the audience and seeing what sticks. His direction is smart in this way, helping the more clunky jokes fall by the wayside rather than linger. The audience barely has time to figure out a character's twisted logic or groan at a crude one-liner before the play races off to the next non sequitur.

Despite a script that at times seems more like a silly Mel Brooks slapstick farce than a clever Neil Simon fable, F.U.D.G.E.'s "Fools" thrives in the other aspects of its production. The cast is joyous and energetic, but perhaps smarter material would give them an even better chance to demonstrate their many talents.

—Staff writer Ali R. Leskowitz can be reached at aleskow@fas.harvard.edu.

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