Shadows from the Story Box

Echo Theatre—Playhouse Studio

This kids' Fringe show proved, as they say in their program, "a good children's play is a good play."

As an adult, I was pulled into the same state of wonder and awe that I saw on the faces of the children around me. It really was a magical experience, and the whole audience, made up of Fringers of all ages, seemed to unanimously agree.

The three gifted actors (Andrea Siemens, Charlene Van Buekenhout, and Priscilla Yakielashek, who wrote the play along with director Claire Borody) transform themselves into over 30 bizarre and delightful characters over the course of the 50-minute piece.

The main through line involves the Spittleshack family stumbling upon a mysterious box in their attic which sends each one in turn on her own Alice-In-Wonderland-like adventure.

With elements of fairy tales and current popular culture both explored and critically examined, this show never talks down to its audience. Judging from the 7-year-old boy I saw after the show using 4-year-old Druscilla Spittleshack's ingenious technique for scaring away monsters (chasing them with crackers) on his laughing little sister, it didn't go over anyone's head.

Echo Theatre has made the right choice: addressing themes like loneliness, oppressive gender roles, the influence of popular culture and even the monsters in the corner of your dark bedroom, using hilarious, over-the-top, surreal characters, and an infectious sense of play.

Steve Furmaniuk

Therese's Creed

Molly Cow Prods.—The Conservatory

Every Fringe contains a jewel that most people miss. I hope that this is not the fate for this production. The people involved are not professional theatre artists, and the playwright is not a household name, but once the lights came up magic took place.

Director, Mary Kelly Campbell, is as good at dissecting a script as any professional, and Suann DeCoursey gave one of the best performances I have seen, in a physically and emotionally demanding role. No wonder she won the best actress award at the Irish Fest in Milwaukee.

Therese gives a human face to the grinding cycle of poverty experienced by too many people in the world, and particularly the people of Newfoundland. Her husband and two of her 10 children die, others move away, and still she completes the daily chores of life, pausing every once in a while to wonder why such simple things as heating her house are almost out of reach, and owning a rickety wringer-washer is a cause for celebration. This production hit every note of a very rich script.

Kevin Longfield

Perseus

Purple Fish Productions—Conservatory

Every Fringe, I find a gem by going to a show because it fills a time slot. Perseus did it for me this year.I hadn't heard a thing about it, but it was the only show that fit the time I had available. The rest of the full house must have known something I didn't.

This is an updated version of the Greek myth, and uses many modern techniques, including Lecoq and some movie references. Some updates just look self-indulgent, but here the actors really make it work. Their physical skills are outstanding, and the actors shared great chemistry. My favourite scene was the grey sisters (all three of them) played by Michelle Seaton.

It's a show everyone should enjoy, and does, given the size of the house, but it's also an object lesson on the value of true fringing: taking a chance on something new just because it's there.

Kevin Longfield

Jenny's of the World, Unite!



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Photo by Leif Norman

The Preacher exposes an enthusiastic evangelist to temptation in a spectacular fall from grace



Photo by Leif Norman

RomAntic aGE turns a man's life upside down to the verses of William Blake

The Root of All Squares

Black Sheep Theatre—Conservatory

Great writing. Great premise. Both actors show promise. However, I feel as if the female actor can have a promising career in children's theatre.

My note, as a fellow actor, is "listen and find your light."

G. Valentine

The Adventures of Baba Yaga

Messenger Theatre Co.—MTC Up the Alley

I have a huge respect for the children's shows presented by past Fringe presenters, multistory theatre, and I was relieved to see a company step up in their absence and produce such an intelligent and finely crafted piece of theatre specifically for children.

Classic fairy tales pull-no-punches vis-a-vis violence, corruption, or just plain evil. Messenger Theatre delivers a pull-no-punches tale about a young girl called Vassilissa, left in the dubious care of her wicked stepmother by her naive father.

As soon as the father is safely out of the way, the ill treatment by her stepmother and two step sisters begins. It culminates in her being sent on the dangerous errand of fetching light from the crone, Baba Yaga.

This staple of Russian folk literature is a frightening old woman who lives in a house that walks the deep dark forest on chicken legs. Her favorite food is little girl stew. Vassilissa is not meant to return.

This is a classically structured tale about purity, overcoming adversity, and recognizing the strength in oneself.Vassilissa overcomes, of course, without having to compromise her own standards of behaviour. And she makes friends along the way.

Apart from the honest way in which the story is told, there's the overall quality of the presentation. The show is a mix of live action, shadow box puppetry, and masks. Lighting and the shadow box work were seamlessly incorporated into the live action. Much thought, rehearsal and, above all, attention to detail served to create a believable environment for the masks.

The audience was completely involved, paying attention and willing to contribute.

I saw this show with my 7-year-old daughter. Her attention never flagged and her response, after seeing three shows, is that Baba Yaga was the best of the bunch.

Thank you, Messenger Theatre for recognizing the intelligence and importance of an up and coming audience, and for creating a show that is equally enjoyable for children and adults.

Michelle Cook

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