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Comedy Helps 'Birds' Soar to New Heights

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Perhaps it is fitting that the Port City Playhouse has chosen a worked-over version of "The Birds" -- originally penned in 414 B.C. by the Greek playwright Aristophanes -- as its last production before the company leaves its longtime Arlington coop.

The late New York Times theater reviewer Walter Kerr apparently thought he could improve upon the work of one of history's greatest comic dramatists, and it is his adaptation (some might prefer bowdlerization) that is the starting point for this effort from director Rick Hayes. In Hayes's hands, Aristophanes's scathing satire is almost unrecognizable under a heavy coating of post-TV irony and slapstick shtick that is, nonetheless, acutely funny at times.

Credit for the comic success of the play rests mostly on the shoulders of Bruce Alan Rauscher, who portrays Pithetaerus, a citizen of Athens who attempts to create a new society in the sky modeled after the Utopian example of birds. Pithetaerus is tired of life in mighty Athens, with its bureaucrats, tax collectors, politicians, military adventurism, democracy and other bores. The idea of Cloud Cuckooland is that it will be a kingdom positioned between men on Earth and their gods in the heavens, denying mortals their deities and separating the gods from the critical support of their humans, unless tribute is paid.

Pithetaerus soon grows rudimentary wings and conspires with birds to build a world that formalizes their carefree avian existence.

Rauscher quickly gets the philosophical underpinnings of his character's message out of the way so he can spend his time mugging, making comic asides directly to the audience, and otherwise deconstructing the structure of the play by continually stepping out of character and reminding all present that this is now farce, not satire. His performance at times seems more stand-up comedy than theater. He works hard to appear to be winging it, and he lays few eggs. Rauscher carries the 14 cast members with him as he displays exquisite comic timing and physical presence dealing with a Greek/bird chorus and a bureaucratic onslaught.

In trying to create his perfect society, Pithetaerus encounters the same human propensities that have ruined Athens for him, and he ends up building a city that starts to look a lot like the capital of a certain great superpower of today. You'll have to see the play to find out for yourself if he is successful in ridding the place of all the bores who would make it a feathered version of Athens.

Notable performances are also turned in by Port City Playhouse newcomer Guy Palace, making the most of several small roles (including ham actor Herald with a poor memory) and David McKendry, who takes most of the pratfalls as Pithetaerus long-suffering right-wing man, Euelpides.

Yvonne Owens's colorful costumes are topped with finely detailed masks by Michael Robinson, almost making up for the pitiful attempt at a set: a series of wooden clouds and mountain tops against a backdrop that resembles an old, wrinkled shower curtain. The set looks borrowed from a third-grade assembly.

This is the company's last show in the technically inadequate, cramped Career Center Stage (really, just a theater-style classroom) at T.C. Williams High School. In November, the company will move to the spacious and better-equipped Lee Center in Alexandria. Port City Playhouse will continue presenting the adventuresome and less frequently produced plays for which it has earned a solid reputation, but the move will present a challenge. The intimate nature of the company's work, with its emphasis on ideas and a natural style of acting, rather than spectacle, will necessarily change as audience and actors face each other over an unfamiliar gulf. Here's hoping the troupe can figure out how to maintain that small-space camaraderie when it moves to the big room.

"The Birds," presented by Port City Playhouse, runs through Sept. 28 at the Career Center Stage of T.C. Williams High School, 3330 King St., Alexandria. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. For tickets or information, call 703-838-2880.

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