

Double Trouble

Pendragon presents a farcical double bill

By Fred Balzac

Do you remember the Mobius strip—that tangible sleight of hand some of us were introduced to in elementary school science? Take a strip of paper and twist it once before joining its two ends in a kind of circle. Trace a line with a pencil along the outer surface, and suddenly you find your line skating along the “inner” surface without ever technically crossing to the other side. It’s a two-sided structure offering the illusion of one-sidedness. Or is it the other way around?

I was reminded of the Mobius strip after catching the double bill of *The Real Inspector Hound* and *Black Comedy*, the first of three “mainstage” offerings in Pendragon Theatre’s annual summer repertory season, which continues through August 31st. Both plays, in very different ways, present a conventional situation hilariously turned inside out.

In *Inspector Hound*, we watch two British critics (as-sayed by Jordan Hornstein and Robert W. Pettee) watching a second-rate provincial theater troupe’s performance of a third-rate Agatha Christie knockoff. The critics are drawn into the action on stage. Mayhem ensues.

In *Black Comedy*, a struggling young artist named Brindsley (Sam K. Shaw) and his fiancée (Donna Moschek) are in his London “flat,” anticipating a soiree with the woman’s demanding father (Christopher McGovern) and a wealthy art patron. They have “borrowed” valuable antique furniture from the fussy, high-strung next-door neighbor (Chris Clarke) who is away for the night. We learn all this while the young man and woman speak on a darkened stage. After a few minutes, the stage lights come up, signifying a blown fuse, and the two protagonists grope their way in the dark. Eventually, an assortment of odd characters find their way into the apartment and the groping increases exponentially. Mayhem ensues.

Curiously, *Black Comedy* and *The Real Inspector Hound*, written in the 1960s within a few years of each

other by two of England’s greatest living playwrights—Peter Shaffer (*Equus*, *Amadeus*) and Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Coast of Utopia*), respectively—each employ five male roles and three female roles. Much of the fun is watching the eight Pendragon actors each inhabit two distinct characters in two different takes on stage comedy: the witty wordplay of Stoppard’s surreal play within a play and the bravura physicality of Shaffer’s more down-to-earth, yet thematically heftier farce. Given the divergent styles and the converging casting requirements, the two one-acts complement each other perfectly.

Scorecard on the Players

The Brit-com double bill features several long-time Pendragon regulars, two newer faces who will be familiar to recent playgoers, one person making her Pendragon debut, and one returnee from several summer seasons ago.

First, the ladies: Binnie Ritchie Holum (who has been featured in such Pendragon productions as *Angels in America, Parts 1 and 2*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and last year’s *The Clean House*) plays an over-demonstrative housekeeper in *Hound* and a nervous middle-class matron in *Black Comedy*. Donna Moschek, who made her Pendragon debut as the disinterested maid in *Clean House*, here performs two versions of a woman scorned—one replete with tennis garb. Newcomer Fiona Christie, who has extensive credits in the United Kingdom and has appeared in episodes of the TV series *Jeeves and Wooster*, plays the coquettish Cynthia Muldoon and the devilishly clever Clea.

The gentlemen, by and large, have an even greater opportunity to demonstrate range—not surprisingly, given the propensity of male playwrights to create meatier parts for men. In addition to the agile and utterly resourceful Brindsley (this would be the witty servant role if it was a *commedia dell’arte* piece), Mr. Shaw, last seen in a Pendragon repertory season in 2003’s *Noises Off*, plays the dashing, mysterious Simon Gascoyne in *Hound*. Meanwhile, Pendragon regular McGovern (including *Tartuffe*, *Lend Me a Tenor*) inhabits another mysterious character,

Major Magnus Muldoon, who is as deft in a wheelchair as his *Comedy* character, Colonel Melkett, is as vulnerable in Brindsley’s blacked-out flat. And Mr. Clarke, who debuted at Pendragon as the blatantly bigoted Juror #10 in last winter’s *Twelve Angry Men*, depicts two flavors of goofball as Inspector Hound and Brindsley’s very particular neighbor, Harold.

As for Messrs. Hornstein (seen most recently as the heroic Juror #8 in *Twelve Angry Men*) and Pettee (the theater’s Managing Director, who has played everything from Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to the title role in *The Foreigner*), they share a peculiar distinction in *Black Comedy* that brands them as another odd couple, nicely following their turn as the momentarily stage-struck critics in *Hound*.

Orchestrating all the mayhem is director Karen Lordi-Kirkham (*Angels in America, Parts 1 and 2*, *Bone Songs*), who seems as equally at home parsing Stoppard’s witticisms as charting the pratfalls in *Black Comedy*. The entertaining evening extends through intermission and beyond the final curtain—whenever you choose to leaf through the program.

Next up in the repertory is *Night Must Fall*, which offers a chilling examination of the flip side of *Inspector Hound*’s send-up of Agatha Christie. The thriller features, among others, Ms. Moschek and Messrs. Clarke, Shaw, and McGovern with yet another challenging opportunity to differentiate characters.

I wonder if there’s a word for two *intersecting* Mobius strips.

Fred Balzac reports on theater for the Lake Champlain Weekly and has been involved in numerous theatrical productions throughout the North Country—appearing most recently in Pendragon’s Twelve Angry Men. For reservations or more information on the comedy double bill and the current repertory season, please call the Pendragon box office at (518) 891-1854 or visit the website www.pendragontheatre.org.