

Wednesday, July 23, 2014

History of the world, take 2

Williamston serves up big laughs with audacious musical comedy

by MARY CUSACK



During a summer when a plane crash in Ukraine or clashes over tunnels in the Middle East could become very real global game-changers, the success of a play like "The Big Bang" is less than assured. After all, this is a musical that summarizes the horror of the Holocaust via Eva Braun's lyrical lament of picking a bad boyfriend.

Williamston Theatre's seasoncloser could be interpreted as either horribly crass or a welcome reminder that despite our best attempts to annihilate ourselves, mankind soldiers on. This too shall pass, the play tells us, although that is probably not the intention of the two main characters, playwrights-within-the-play.

Crafted by composer Jed Feuer and lyricist Boyd Graham, "The Big Bang" is an attempt by fictionalized versions of themselves (Zev Steinberg and Matthew Gwynn, respectively) to get backers for an ambitious 12-hour musical version of the history of Earth. The audience represents the investors, sitting in the tony living room of an out-of-town proctologist as the duo enact an abridged version of the epic.

Boyd and Jed are either oblivious students of history or empathetic geniuses who want to broaden the audience's view of world-changing events by providing radically alternate points of view. Probably the former. Case in point: The story of Romans torturing Christians in the Colosseum is told from the point of view of a hungry lion. In another piece, the devastating Great Famine in Ireland is summed in one man's ballad dedicated to his last potato.

While the play is great fun and funny, one effect that gets old is the pair's handwringing nervousness. They are selling an idea of unprecedented audaciousness, and while they are obviously enthusiastic and committed to the ludicrously epic musical, it

might have been more interesting for the pair to be cocky rather than cloying.

That said, Gwynn and Steinberg are fearless and funny. From stripping down to their skivvies to plucking props from around the well-equipped set, they transform themselves into ridiculous versions of, among many others, Adam, Eve, Attila the Hun, Caesar, Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella. Gwynn's send-up of Nefertiti as a modern-day diva is worth the price of admission, including an "oh no they didn't!" reference to "Leave it to Beaver."

The lyrics are loaded with some excellent puns and double-entendres, moving at such a clip that a second viewing might be necessary to catch all the bon mots. At a sleek 90 minutes, the piece is quick and concise, playing out its conceit without wearing out its welcome.

"The Big Bang"

Williamston Theatre Through Aug. 17 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 3 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays \$20 Thursdays/\$25 Friday- Saturday evenings/\$22 matinees/\$10 students/ seniors \$2 discount 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston (517) 655-7469, wiliamstontheatre.com

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