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REVIEW: "Dead Man's Shoes"

Williamston Theatre & Performance Network Theatre

Walk a mile in 'Dead Man's Shoes'

By Michael H. Margolin

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A deeply twisted comedy by Joseph Zettelmaier has just opened at Williamston Theatre, and it steals your heart – after breaking your ankles, punching you in the gut and puncturing your lungs.

"Dead Man's Shoes" is about two men of the West – our true, native West – who start out together, cell by cell and cheek by jowl in a lockup run by Sheriff J.B. Anthony. Soon, they are out and on a picaresque adventure, a search for revenge by Injun Bill Picote, a lean, black-hatted, handsome outlaw and his new sidekick, a frump nicknamed Froggy.

Their journey takes them to Billings, Montana, then Denver and into the valley of the shadow of death where God's rod and staff will be no comfort. It seems that Injun Bill's guilt will not be assuaged until he kills one man in particular: the man who took his buddy in crime, George – who bragged of exploits committed by Bill himself – skinned him and made him into a pair of shoes.

So there are two pair of symbolic shoes in this play: those made from a dead man's skin – beat that, Christian Laboutin – and Bill's shiny black boots made for walking. And death.

Bill kills only with knives. As he tells Froggy, "Kill a man with a gun don't take more skill than pointing a finger". Bill points his finger and it is knife-sharp.

Set just a few years after the bloody period described so brilliantly in Cormac McCarthy's "Blood Meridian," the playwright summons the meanness and violence of the west, but leavens it with laughter as the Coen brothers did in "True Grit." You might just think, too, of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza on their picaresque journey.

Two things that Zettelmaier does very well is create character and draw laughs from their plights – bugs pinned by the author's wit; but he also builds a plot out of which the humor grows, natural, ironic, teasing and sarcastic. And, oh my, he uses language with flare.

Director David Wolber of Performance Network (which is co-producer and subsequent presenter of this fine show) gives shape to the show with his clever staging, right on the mark, giving his four actors room to shine.

The two lead roles belong to Drew Parker as Picotee, who you might imagine as Tommy Lee Jones playing the role as a young man. He clenches his teeth, bares his bravado and finally gives up his guts – literally and figuratively – for the playwright.

His sidekick is the obese Aral Gribble (and before I get the complaint letters, let me say that the script means for him to be a tub of lard). Gribble shakes, rattles and rolls his performance around the stage whether bathing, pleading for his life or bidding a whore to undress slowly – the revelation in that scene, however, is not nudity, but a bit of ironic meet cute.

Wolber has also found the varieties of sweetness and toughness in Maggie Meyer who plays all but one of the women in the show: prostitutes, hard-up widows, angels of mercilessness.

Paul Hopper plays all the other characters, including a madam in drag that veers close to over the top, but stays within reasonable drag comedy. Hopper, a chameleon in show after show in Southeastern Michigan, here turns into a snake oil salesman of death. He is remarkable in the last few minutes of the play: Bravura is not too great a word for his performance.

Kirk Domer's scenic design is a show-stealer: A huge, rolling scrim some 10 to 12 feet high rotates by a crank at the side of the stage – often by Ms. Meyer. The painting on the scrim is in shades of brown and depicts destinations from the travels of Bill and Froggy. At intermission, names of local businesses face front. Fiendishly clever, and well lit by Daniel C. Walker's lighting design.

Zettelmaier's "It Came From Mars" had its dual premiere at Williamston and Ann Arbor's Performance Network in 2010. Among other works nominated for the American Theatre Critics Award for Best New Play, his "And the Creek Don't Rise" was the best selling show in the Williamston Theatre's five year history.

Aside from its laughs, its touchstones in literature, this play contains adult language and themes in, it should be said, the worst possible best taste. Surely, this will be one of the best of the season, with performances that are equally memorable.

SHOW DETAILS: "Dead Man's Shoes" continues at Williamston Theatre, 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston, Thursday-Sunday through Feb. 26. Tickets: \$20-25. For information: 517-655-7469 or www.williamstontheatre.org.

The production then moves to Performance Network Theatre, 120 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor. Previews March 8-11 & 15 (\$15-\$32); then runs Thursday-Sunday, March 16-April 8. Tickets: \$25-\$41. For information: 734-663-0681 or www.performancenetwork.org.

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