

Arsenic, Old Lace and Impeccable Balance

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(L to R) Leslie Fitzwater, Joe Picchetti and Gladys Chmiel in ARSENIC AND OLD LACE with Milwaukee Entertainment Group

Joseph Kesselring's classic dark comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace* animates the subterranean stage of the **Brumder Mansion** for one more weekend this month. **Milwaukee Entertainment Group** has assembled an impressive cast under the direction of **Zach Thomas Woods**. Kesselring's mismatched collection of characters can be a challenge. There's a killer, a doctor, a theatre critic, a few cops, a playwright and...quite a lot else. With so many weird and interesting personalities diving around onstage, the overall experience can be unpleasantly disorienting as things crash into each other at odd angles. Woods does a brilliant job of juggling it all on a very small and intimate space. This isn't *just* a talented cast. This is a talented cast that's been given the freedom to embellish each character with a vividly unique personality. Somehow Woods has managed to give the actors room to do this while keeping the overall rhythm of the show moving swiftly from scene to scene. No one crowds out the delightful chaos of the comedy.

Gladys Chmiel and **Leslie Fitzwater** are comically charming as the Brewster sisters--a couple of elderly women living together in an old house. The two actresses' lengthy histories in local theatre are perfectly placed onstage. Their personalities could easily overwhelm everyone else in the ensemble given their rather central placement in the plot, but Chmiel and Fitzwater are engagingly reserved in

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Archives

October 2018
(/blog/archives/10-2018)
September 2018
(/blog/archives/09-2018)
August 2018
(/blog/archives/08-2018)
July 2018
(/blog/archives/07-2018)
June 2018
(/blog/archives/06-2018)
May 2018
(/blog/archives/05-2018)
April 2018
(/blog/archives/04-2018)
March 2018
(/blog/archives/03-2018)
February 2018
(/blog/archives/02-2018)
January 2018
(/blog/archives/01-2018)
December 2017
(/blog/archives/12-2017)
November 2017
(/blog/archives/11-2017)
October 2017
(/blog/archives/10-2017)
September 2017
(/blog/archives/09-2017)
August 2017
(/blog/archives/08-2017)

Categories

All (/blog/category/all)

 RSS Feed (/1/feed)

their approach to the sisters. Milwaukee theatre veteran **Tom Marks** has a similarly minimalist approach to characterization in a couple of roles around the edges of the ensemble including a priest and the head of a sanitarium.

In their retirement, the two sisters take lodgers in their home. This is a production of the show being staged in an ACTUAL historic mansion that's been turned into a B&B, which lends a great atmosphere to the show. The whole of the Brumder echoes the atmosphere with an organic feel that no stage could match. It's such a perfect match between venue and play that talk of the sisters' basement feels pleasantly disorienting on a gut level. Characters talk of a basement in the cozy home of the two sisters...and the show is being staged in the basement of a cozy Brumder. But you walked down the stairs to see them. On the surface, you know where you are (below the surface.) On a gut level, though, it feels like you're on street level. (It's weird.)

Joe Picchetti plays the sisters' nephew Mortimer. It's been fascinating watching Picchetti's evolution onstage over the years. I remember seeing the guy in shows at Marquette years ago. There's a real sophistication that's settled-into his stage presence. Here he's working with a very subtle and nuanced exasperated sense of humor. He's working quite brilliantly with the intimacy of the subterranean stage. Some of the lines are delivered in a subtle murmur to himself that's somehow clearly audible throughout the basement. Some of his best comedy is almost delivered *in a whisper*. There aren't many places where that sort of delivery works, so it's really, really cool to see Picchetti embrace whispering comedy here.

Some of Picchetti's more aggressive physical comedy is played against **Liz Shipe** in the role of his girlfriend Elaine Harper. There's a conservative sweetness about the character that is all too easy to read as simple and demure. Shipe doesn't go for the obvious. From the beginning, Shipe establishes a very dramatically physical presence for Elaine onstage. There's a comically appealing grace in sudden movements and passionate outbursts that lend a great deal to the production. Rolling into the final week of performances, Shipe seems to have acquired a head cold. How is she able to assert strength and beauty through that head cold? I really have no idea. All I know is that she makes it work. Elaine has that much more assertive strength powering through a head cold in addition to everything else that she has to deal with in her intermittent time onstage.

Matthew Ecclestone arrives to complicate things in the role of the killer Jonathan Brewster. Ecclestone has played villains before. He does an exemplary job here. The character is constantly compared to Boris Karloff. Some make-up effects amplify the similarity between Ecclestone and the legendary screen actor. Ecclestone reaches into Karloff's diction and dramatic delivery to make the similarity that much more palpable...and it does wonders for the character's sense of menace.

Jim Donaldson plays Jonathan's accomplice Dr. Einstein. Donaldson cuts the harshness of an exaggerated German accent into something cuddly and lovable. The character is compromised...a nice guy caught-up in the brutality of circumstance. Donaldson's unique stage presence crafts a thoroughly likable character tarnished a bit by the choices life has given him.

Sean Duncan is way...WAY over the top in the role of an aging gentleman who believes himself to be Teddy Roosevelt. Duncan's ridiculously overwhelming approach to the character is kind of essential to stand out amidst the wild spectrum of energies found in the rest of the cast. Also: Duncan is very tall and does not resemble the late president's short and rather robust figure. A tall, thin guy with vintage glasses, a mustache and a cigar looks kind of overwhelmingly like...Groucho Marx. Duncan's spot-on exaggeration of Teddy Roosevelt effectively keeps the Groucho at bay while lending a gentle insanity around the edges of the action.

And then there are the police. A couple of women serve as police officers who appear early in the story. Tiny **Ashley Retzlaff** swims in her uniform as Office Brophy. She's got a really clever grasp of physical comedy...particularly as a frail, gruff little gnome of a man who comes to the house looking for lodging. **Danielle Levings** is irresistibly gregarious as Officer O'Hara...a policewoman who can't

seem to stop talking about a script for a play that she's been working on. **Adam Qutaishat** rounds out the cast in the role of Lieutenant Rooney...a sharp, competent policeman who arrives near the end of the play to help wrap everything up.

It's a full cast. Usually in a show this big, there's a performance here or there that feels a little lifeless. Not here. In this production, things are only lifeless when they need to be. (There are a couple of corpses that get dragged around a bit.) It's quite an accomplishment to get a group together that's this well-articulated in a script that is as good as *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Productions of Kesselring's comedy might not be a total rarity, but it's pretty rare to get a group together that works together this well on so many levels.

Milwaukee Entertainment Group's production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* runs for one more weekend at the Brumder Mansion on 3046 West Wisconsin Avenue. Tickets are available for 7:30 performances **Thursday Oct. 25** and **Friday Oct. 26**. (Closing night the 27th is sold out.) For ticket reservations and more, visit Milwaukee Entertainment Group online (<http://milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com/arsenic-and-old-lace>).

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