

WISCONSIN THEATER SPOTLIGHT

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'NOT DEAD YET' ROMPS THROUGH BRUMDER MANSION



The cast of "Not Dead Yet" has fun with Rip Butler in the Brumder Mansion. Pictured, from left, are Brittany Curran as Susie Ditz, Zach Sharrock as Adof Ebola, Dennis Lewis as Cameron James Pinehurst III, Amber Regan as Bernice Is-not-my-name, Chris Goode as E. Orr Block and Cara Johnston as Ginger Katz.

BY MARILYN JOZWIK

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It's apparent that Andrew Peterson, the local playwright of "Not Dead Yet," has seen his share of murder mysteries, farces and social satires and has an affinity for the Brumder Mansion in Milwaukee.

His show, being presented by Milwaukee Entertainment Group at the Brumder Mansion, has elements of all. The show seems to take its cues from Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None," in which a number of guests show up at a secluded mansion and one-by-one are murdered. Peterson's "Dead" has a similar motif, though one has to remember the name of the show. Just like Christie's mystery, Peterson includes a rhyme told by the remaining characters after a death. Unlike Christie's, Peterson rhymes are hilarious, as is the entire show.

"Dead," too, takes place in an old mansion – The Brumder – and all the theater-goers become part of the show as a tyrannical director, Cameron James Pinehurst III (perhaps modeled after Hollywood director James Cameron), whose star has fallen, is staging a reading of his latest project. The audience gathers on the first floor for a welcome by E. Orr Block (Chris Goode), Pinehurst's toady, who is constantly interrupted by his device. Eventually he gets his little speech out and

the group makes its way to the lower level, where the reading is to take place, but not before a skirmish takes place on the first floor.

From there, all sorts of farce is conjured up, nicely guided by director Robert A. Zimmerman. A full-sized dummy named Rip Butler, who is present for the reading, is the first to meet his demise. There's a little of the "Spamalot" word play ("The elephant in the room" is followed by the sound of an elephant). Plus, there are lots of jokes surrounding Pinehurst's style. All his associates must sign a non-disclosure form, pledging total allegiance under penalty of having to remain in his service even longer. Even audience members must sign one!



Cara Johnston plays Ginger Katz in Milwaukee Entertainment Group's "Not Dead Yet" at the Brumder Mansion.

We learn about those assembled for the reading – Bernice Is-not-my-name (Amber Regan), whose real name didn't fit on a marquee, drinks too much; Susie Ditz (Brittany Curran), whose family is known for Ditz crackers and who resembles her last name; and Adolf Ebola (Zach Sharrock), who always plays Nazis in his shows.

The spoofing of the totalitarian ways of Pinehurst – similar to some leaders of the past and present -- gives the show some food for thought while the characters are falling over each other to please the dictator, including performing cheers and even forming a human train called The Brownnose Express, with one character proclaiming "Dignity is overrated."

Even Pinehurst himself is forced to grovel to his benefactor, a gun-toting baby that gurgles his approval or disapproval.

Dennis Lewis as the haughty Pinehurst exudes dramatic flair – like a Shakespearean actor – in all he says and does, commanding attention. He hits the right tone for the most part, though he can project his terrifying Pinehurst just as well with clenched teeth as with shouting, which he does often. Lewis nicely inserts all the comic lines to great effect, as when

he enters a scene proclaiming, “I love the smell of sycophancy in the morning.”

As Pinehurst’s over-anxious assistant, the bow-tied Goode is a cliché, but a delightful one. His Block character carries his loyalty with such enthusiasm it’s contagious.

Regan gives Bernice a sort of characterization you’d see in a Humphrey Bogart gangster movie. You’d almost expect her to utter a line like, “Just put your lips together and blow.” There is a wisdom and worldliness about her that makes the audience want to know more. Her early scenes help set the table nicely for the madcap comedy to come.

Perhaps the most engaging character is Curran’s expressive, wide-eyed Susie Ditz, who has to navigate life as a “Ditz.” She milks her ditziness – even after a gunshot to the noggin – while keeping her character from becoming cartoonish.

Sharrock’s Ebola is in a constant state of angst – banged up after an early altercation – finding himself teetering on the edge of hysteria in dealing with Pinehurst’s demands.

Cara Johnston adds a hilarious scene as Ginger Katz, aka Hellcat, who returns to the mansion to confront Pinehurst. Katz was sent to prison for stalking Pinehurst. Katz is more cat than human, even proclaiming, “If you only would have cleaned out my litter box a little more

often.” Johnston’s portrayal is pure, delightful camp, making a Katz scene a fun romp rather than an outlandish diversion.

There is a lot of smart dialogue as well as clever references and physical humor. Plus, being set in the Brumder Mansion gives the show added appeal. There is even a cameo – sort of -- by the mansion’s original owner. However, some of the playwright’s devices were overdone: the play on the names, the slo-mo scene, the cheers.

Yet, there is plenty of wit and humor in Anderson’s work to appeal to a wide audience.

IF YOU GO

Who: Milwaukee Entertainment Group

What: “Not Dead Yet”

When: Through June 22

Where: Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee

Info/Tickets:

MilwaukeeEntertainmentGroup.com