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Wild West in Action Drama at the Brumder

By Russ Bickerstaff 3 hours ago



April Paul and Steve Alonte in JACK OF HEARTS - Valerie Lighthart

J.J. Gatesman's steampunk wild western revenge story *Jack of Hearts* makes its debut this month in the cozy space of the Brumder Mansion. The atmosphere is firmly established on entrance into the historic mansion's basement. Actors lounge about in costume in a lazy saloon setting. There are a couple of guys onstage playing poker. Order beer or wine from the bar and you're into the play. Action on stage gradually intensifies until the plot begins to roll-in.

Josh Krauss plays Jack Heart: owner of the establishment everyone has come to find themselves in. He's a sturdy western hero. He's a man with a past. He's a man looking for revenge. He's a man protecting what he owns. The big threat to the well-being of the establishment comes in the form of a gang of thugs with prosthetic mecha enhancements led by the mysterious arch-villain Duke. Duke is played with requisite gravity by Steve Alonte. One of the most formidable in his gang is the sleek and passionate Page. April Paul makes an intense impression as a gunslinger who wears her prosthetic heart outside her chest. She's got a history with Jack that complicates matters in a story with just enough post-apocalyptic sci-fi twist and tumble to keep it from being a tired, rusty old western revenge story.

Aiding the script are a number of impressive performances in and around the edges of the show. Liz Whitford plays with a nice range as a prostitute and the wife of a powerful man AND an assassin named Wallace. Kim Emer and Kara Penrose lend some warmth to the stage as a couple of people on opposite ends of relations with both Heart and his establishment. Emer is charismatic as the veteran of a very exhausting life in the wasteland while Penrose is endearing as someone who is only just discovering it. I loved Brittany Curran in the role of the artistically skewed dancer everyone knows as Dodo. The character finds grace in surreally poetic awkwardness...an idiosyncratic beauty that Curran renders quite well.

The flow of the Gatesman's plot is brutal and aggressive with occasional bursts of humor. Josh Perkins does quite well in the central humor role as a host at the establishment named Yorick. Perkins is quite deft even when the script's humor feels a bit flat. The story weaves in and out of tragedy and comedy. Sometimes the two mash in the ways that might not be intentional. This is a very classic feeling all the western with an unusually high body count for a local theater show. The seemingly endless parade of bodies on their way to the floor can feel silly. Given that there's kind of a disconnect between prerecorded sound effects and firearms that would sound a lot more devastating coming from fully-functional stage guns, the actual action can feel a bit weak. (Fight choreography always seems so difficult to bring across at close range.) In spite of this, the show holds together quite well. It's such a refreshing novelty to see a wild west plot make it into a local production. I've always felt that the percussion of action and explosions and gunplay are overrated. (After a while it's difficult to see what you're looking at in an action sequence.) The dramatic angle of action stories is where the power of the genre TRULY rests and that's vividly brought to the stage in this production.

The overall plot is pretty standard wild west stuff. The sci-fi steampunk elements sparkle and sputter out from around the edges. A pity there hadn't been more of a budget for the mecha. A few major items aside, the sci-fi around the edges is only hinted at visually. The post-apocalyptic setting allows for a few novelties, though. A romance between two gunslingers is really, really appealing. It would likely be out of place in a traditional western. Josh Krause and April Paul have a great opportunity here. It's really refreshing in particular to see Paul put in such a stylishly roguish performance as a character so badass that her heart is literally on display. Given the nature of the genre, I'd love to see Paul play that same character in a series of prequels. She delivers the dramatic end of an action hero to the stage quite well. (SO cool.) Given more time and more of a budget for fight choreography and gunplay and such, this type of show could bring in an audience not typically familiar with attending local theatre.

Milwaukee Entertainment Group's Jack of Hearts runs through **Oct. 31** at the **Brumder Mansion** on **3046 W. Wisconsin Ave.** For ticket reservations, visit [Milwaukee Entertainment Group online](#).