



## Optimism! or Voltaire's Candide

by Jessica Vaughn- April 28, 2013



“Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” Spooky Action Theater takes Candide’s satire of life, love, hope and human decency to the extreme in *Optimism! Or Voltaire’s Candide*, their dramatization of his most famous novel. It was adapted for the stage by TJ Edwards from a translation by Richard Aldington. They’ve partnered with the Alliance Francaise for this production.

Spooky Action Theater takes their name from Einstein and the of the quantum mechanics of entangled particles that spontaneously mimic each other no matter how far apart they are. Einstein called it “Spooky action at a distance.” They are a newer company in the DC area and attempt to create that spooky action between actor and audience and play and the world of imagination.



This play is an excellent example of that. It is an ambitious dash through 30 scenes of the 30 chapters of *Candide*. Nine actors take on dozens and dozens of roles in two-second changes as the action roams from across Europe to South America and back again following young Candide (Ryan Alan Jones) as he attempts to find the truth about the nature of life. An old philosopher, Pangloss (Michael Kevin Darnall) has told him that this is the best of all possible worlds; everything that happens is for the best, and therefore whatever happens is the best.

Each scene is a test of that optimism. Candide is tortured, beaten, whipped, flogged, sunk, and thrown out of more places than I could keep track of. His love Cunegonde (Patricia Lynn) is raped, sold, and beaten...repeatedly. And yes, this is a comedy. Every character they meet along the way seems to have some story of woe, and Candide is continually flabbergasted that *this* could be the best possible world. And that’s before he hits the Inquisition. Like the best satire, I found myself both horrified and laughing uncontrollably throughout the play.

People have had that reaction to the work since its publication in 1759. Francois-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) drew on the clichés of the romance and adventure stories of the day and was inspired to question prevailing philosophies by the realities of the Seven Years War and the Lisbon Earthquake, both times of terrible suffering in Europe. The church immediately banned the novel because he does poke serious fun at their institutions but it quickly took off and remains popular today and more relevant than ever.

There is no permanent seating in the theater, allowing the company to set the entire theater however they like. Set Designer Giorgos Tsappas creates four risers of seats in the four corners surrounding a raised square platform that starts the play piled with white letters. The best part of the set is the floor – painted in swirling oceanic blue. That square platform becomes all-important as the stage for many different places. The sound design by Bradley Porter enhances the play from the first moment with twittering birds and subtle music, lending a soundtrack to the production – though the actors themselves provide many of the sound effects – from wind to canons to bells. The play begins as actors grab the letters to spell out the key phrase of the novel, “The best of all possible worlds.”

They don't bother with subtlety as characters narrate through both the plot and the philosophy, but the glee with which they approach every moment saves it from becoming preachy. The script is a delightful mash-up of philosophy and comedy as raunchy and hilarious as any modern Apatow film. Similarly, the language is a mix of complicated poetry and modern slang. The entire play is done in rhyming couplets. Edwards skill with language and rhymes is very impressive.

Director Michael Chamberlin staged shipwrecks, sea battles, earth quakes and more with just the actors onstage. Often they themselves were the props, moving a ship or acting as horses carrying one another. Not content for them to enter and exit like most humans, he also has the actors diving onstage from a dumbwaiter, climbing up and down walls to openings far above the seats and cart wheeling off chairs. The play is long with its 30 scenes, but Chamberlin keeps the action moving in a choreographed dance of chaos that works well for the fantastical elements and skims through some of the more gory details.

Fight Choreographer Monalisa Arias took full advantage of these talented actors. They crashed into everything and to each other. I was shocked when they jumped right back up unharmed.

Michael Kevin Darnall (Pangloss) does great things with the language in a charming southern accent and has timing as smooth as any Shakespearean comedic actor. He disappears into many of his varied roles. Ryan Alan Jones (Candide) is a physical actor, reveling in his earnest, innocent character. He and Patricia Lynn (Cunegonde) both have great timing and delightful chemistry. They bring tons of energy to their parts and have fun with their lightning dialogue. Rosemary Regan (Old Woman) is spry and hilarious, running as fast and as hard as the rest of them. Adeoye (Jacques) has huge stage presence and an ear for accents. He embodies some of the craziest characters and plays a very convincing horse.

The rest of the cast (Jessica Shearer, Gregory Stuart, Ryan Tumulty, and John Tweel) slide in and out of roles smoothly and effortlessly and often it is their own reaction to the material that creates the best humor of the piece. The seamless, complicated blocking, where they are often more acrobat than actor, is entertaining and the accents they don – from Jamaica to Brit and back are awesome.

The costumes by Laree Lentz include a versatile collection of patched coats and dresses that transform a beggar into a priest in seconds or trade one character's shirt for another's apron ten scenes later. There are very few props and most are ingenious creations of brown paper designed by Deb Cerie. For the rest, the cast makes do with their imagination. The lighting design by Brian S. Allard does much of the heavy lifting, drenching the stage in reds whenever anyone is murdered or hurt.

“Prepare for the worst...It's pretty gory,” Cunegonde warns at one point, and the warning is right on. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is off-limits. This is an unapologetic farce – loud, over the top – and yet strangely hopeful. They captured Voltaire perfectly. This play may or may not leave you with a shred of hope for the human race, but at least we can still laugh at ourselves, and this production is worth seeing just for the incredible job the cast does at travelling around the world as dozens of people with just two chairs, a boat, and a bit of brown paper.

Spooky Action Theater has created a rollicking, laugh-out-loud evening!