

The Washington Post

‘Optimism!’ puts new shine on the old Pangloss

May 5, 2013 by Jane Horowitz

A few cast members wander in and mingle with the audience just minutes before “Optimism! or Voltaire’s Candide” gets underway in Spooky Action Theater’s high-energy and highly inventive staging. The actors’ early entrance remains so low-key that many theatergoers will focus more on the jumbled pile of foot-high block letters stacked atop a platform in the middle of the performance space. (The enjoyably toy-like props and witty sets were designed by Deb Cerie and Giorgos Tsappas, respectively.)

The nine-member cast dives headlong into T.J. Edwards’s sprightly adaptation of Voltaire’s novella, arranging the block letters into the book’s catchphrase, “the best of all possible worlds,” and announcing they’ll cover “30 scenes in just over two hours!” Well, more like two hours, 38 minutes, and things drag occasionally, but never for long. The 1759 book, with its bloody dissection of human hypocrisy, is a classic for a reason, and Edwards holds handily onto that. Director Michael Chamberlin’s in-the-round staging even makes droll use of little dumbwaiter doors in the walls of Spooky Action’s church-basement space. And into all the scenic atmosphere, Chamberlin’s actors bring an easy athleticism and a light touch with Edwards’s rhymed couplets and whimsy.



A naive European sub-aristocrat, Candide (a winningly wide-eyed Ryan Alan Jones), must go into exile for daring to kiss his higher-born cousin Cunegonde (worldly, flirty Patricia Lynn). He encounters on his travels the horrors of war, religious persecution, slavery and natural disaster. Everything young Candide sees puts the lie to the feel-good philosophy he learned at the knee of Cunegonde’s tutor, Pangloss (Michael Kevin Darnall) — that we live in “the best of all possible worlds.” Darnall’s Pangloss is a young hipster, eclectically turned out in argyle socks, two-tone shoes and aqua jeans (the fun, period-jumbled costumes are by Laree Lentz). He’s a dissolute phony, a wise guy posing as a wise man. We eventually learn he doesn’t even believe his own philosophy. You see, Edwards’s adaptation reminds us, how everything old is new again?

Another highlight in a uniformly able cast is Rosemary Regan’s Old Woman, who helps Candide and Cunegonde find each other and navigate royal courts, jails, slums and worse. A onetime aristocrat who fell on hard times, she tells the youngsters how she lost one buttock to invading soldiers in search of meat. With her raspy voice and deadpan delivery, Regan makes the Old Woman seem world-weary, but with a little reserve of friskiness.

This is a good point to note that the play has many references to rape and venereal disease, so despite the whimsy, it's probably not for middle-schoolers or even young teenagers, depending upon parental taste.

A New York-based actor and writer who has appeared off-Broadway and in TV shows such as "House of Cards" and "Law and Order," playwright Edwards was a major participant in Washington area theater just as its growth spurt began in the 1980s and '90s. He acted at Woolly Mammoth, Studio Theatre and the Washington Shakespeare Company, now WSC Avant Bard. His plays "New York Mets" and "National Defense" premiered at Woolly Mammoth and won Helen Hayes Awards for outstanding new play in 1987 and 1988.

This reviewer remembers those plays. The same wit, occasional glibness and good-humored edge show up in "Optimism! or Voltaire's Candide." Some of Edwards's lines may overreach in the modernity department ("Gimme a break!" "Puh-lease!") or smack too much of '60s and '70s hippie musicals ("O happy day, auto-da-fe!"). A Jewish joke also falls flat. But **overall, he has crafted a swell adaptation — modern, but never losing touch with Voltaire's time and place.**

Early on, Edwards takes a little shot at the oft-revised 1956 musical "Candide" and its composer, Leonard Bernstein (whose surname the actors mispronounce; it's "bern-STINE," not "bern-STEEN"). That musical, despite its many flaws, deserves better. And the story as it unfolds in Edwards's script, so rousingly performed by Spooky Action, isn't really all that different.

Horwitz is a freelance writer.

Optimism! or Voltaire's Candide

by François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), adapted by T.J. Edwards. Lighting design, Brian S. Allard; sound, Bradley Porter; fight choreography, Monalisa Arias. With Adeoye, Gregory Stuart, Ryan Tumulty and John Tweel. About two hours, 38 minutes, including an intermission. Through May 19 by Spooky Action Theater, at the Universalist National Memorial Church, 1810 16th St. NW. Visit www.spookyaction.org or call 202-248-0301.