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A Modern-Day 'Peace' With Classic Arrows

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Playwright Callie Kimball gives good taste a whuppin' in "Peace," a lively adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy that puts our era's war on terror on its broad watch list.

Aristophanes opened with dung jokes and blissfully escalated to zingers on matters of security, and that pattern works for Kimball. War, racism, abuse: "Peace" says things that nice plays don't say, and gets away with it because -- well, because it's in the service of a higher good, of course. This antiwar comedy might be revived and adapted more often if Aristophanes hadn't written an even better one, "Lysistrata."



Andrew Vergara, left, Gwen Grastorf and Matt Dewberry in Washington Shakespeare Company's production of Aristophanes' "Peace," adapted by Callie Kimball into a contemporary antiwar comedy. (By Ray Gniewek – Washington Shakespeare Company)

Plot-wise, this "Peace" sometimes scatters, sags and even wags the occasional lecturing finger about terror and war, but for the most part, its take-no-prisoners impudence is choice. Kimball's aggressive update, commissioned by and premiering at the Washington Shakespeare Company, slaps its targets and keeps moving, giving Alexander Strain's balanced cast plenty of colorful things to do along the way.

We're not in ancient Greece anymore, at least not once the chorus botches its stately opening chant with a fit of the giggles. After that contagious subversion, the robes come off and the setting is revealed as modern Carthage, Tenn. Seems a successful married couple has just lost a son in combat, so Graleo -- the father -- is about to head for Mount Olympus demanding answers from the gods.

It's Peace he's after, but first Graleo has to get through a waiting room supervised by Hermes (vain and high-strung in Sara Barker's amusing performance). Beyond that lies a sanctum of the gods that is alarmingly like a frat house. War (Brian Crane, smirking and bellowing) presides over two snarky war profiteers and a party boy named Havoc (Joe Brack, all but cross-eyed with drink and violence); this gang has Peace locked up.

Springing that goddess is the mission, but hardly the endpoint of play. There are still deals to be cut and a big wedding to get through, and the show's course wobbles for a stretch in the second act. The final punch Kimball seems to want to throw doesn't quite land with knockout force.

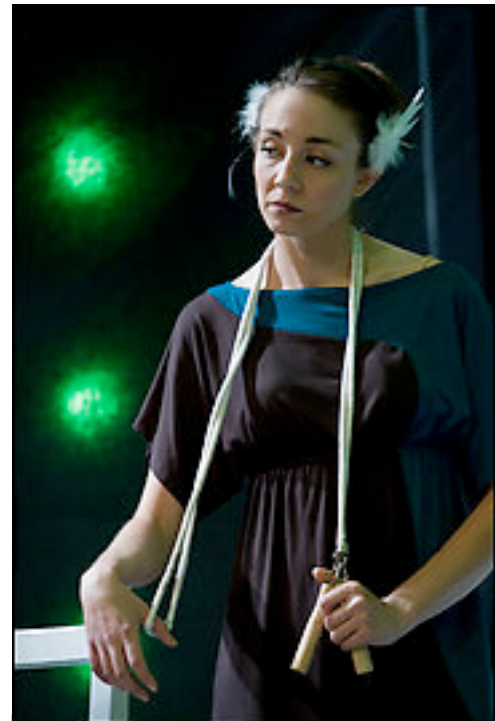
What does register even in the iffy patches is a risky sense of humor and quick, hip language that the actors seem to adore. Brack, whose antics as Havoc are as frankly dark as they are exuberant, doubles as a vulgar wedding DJ in the second act, and some of his exchanges with Gwen Grastorf's Festival (one of Peace's two daughters) are hilariously decadent.

The play's ear is especially sharp as several characters try rousing the long-captive Peace (played by a serene Anastasia Wilson) to action by citing the chaos of the past 15 years. The highlights are horrifying and absurd; it's an inspired list that riffs from tabloid scandal to major tragedy, and as the actors zip through it, you have to admire Kimball's nerve and her generally sure judgment about where to draw the comic line.

Subtler successes include the depiction of Hermes not as a god, but as an emotionally incontinent goddess, flitting from cockiness to self-doubt and back in a way that mocks the soap operatic tendencies of so many Olympians. Barker's a whiz at the neuroses, and even masters a slightly different set as Graleo's wife (the role that seems to need more spotlighting in this production), and John Geoffrion's quietly nervous responses as the intimidated Graleo are nimble and funny.

The show's design has a vaguely classical feel -- open platform, strips of fabric streaming overhead -- but Strain, a busy actor himself, mainly tends to the acting, keeping the cast focused on not overselling the vivid Tennessee twangs and party-hearty slang. Aristophanes would recognize the atmosphere; it's giddy and gaudy, rude and pretty much right.

Peace, by Callie Kimball. Directed by Alexander Strain. About two hours. Set, Tobias Harding; lights, Andrew F. Griffin; costumes, Yvette M. Ryan; sound design, Christopher Baine. With Matt "Slice" Hicks, Brandon McCoy, Simone Zvi, Andrew Vergara and Matt Dewberry. Through Sept. 28 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Arlington. Call 703-418-4808 or visit <http://www.washingtonshakespeare.org>.



In Washington Shakespeare Company's updated Aristophanes comedy, Hermes (Sara Barker) is delightfully neurotic. (By Ray Gniewek – Washington Shakespeare Company)