

Youngblood Reviews for... **SPIRITS TO ENFORCE**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel April 23, 2010
Speaking of Shakespeare, Youngblood in high 'Spirits'

I am writing these words on Shakespeare's birthday, which is always a great reason to party. But at some productions of the Bard's plays, I feel like I'm watching a funeral we all feel obliged to attend, even though nobody much liked the man being remembered.

I guarantee you'll have no such problem if you catch the Youngblood Theatre Company's stirring homage to Shakespeare's "The Tempest," as embodied in Mickle Maher's mesmerizing play, "Spirits to Enforce." To paraphrase Will, it's the stuff that great theater is made of.

Maher's title comes from Prospero's final lines, as the former magician leaves his island - and the spirits there who had made his rare visions come alive.

Four centuries later, those spirits are hanging on as 12 desperate actors. As the play begins, they're seated at a cluttered table in a submerged submarine, where they're phoning for money to fund their production of "The Tempest."

The cast's underwater status reflects what's happened to the arts in a soulless culture that has lost touch with the world's potent magic. They're moored offshore because Caliban - who has morphed over the centuries into Professor Cannibal - has polluted and corrupted their former island paradise.

In a bid for relevance in a world where they're largely invisible, each of the 12 actors not only plays a character in "The Tempest," but also has a secret life as a superhero doing battle with Cannibal and his evil minions. That's as much as I'll reveal about the most imaginative superhero identities you'll ever encounter.

The spirits are tired of this endless war. They want to go home - back to a time when the world didn't need superheroes, because poetry was inspiration enough. Aided by generous helpings from "The Tempest" that are ingeniously embedded in Maher's text, director Michael Cotey and his superb cast take us there.

Maher's script is crammed with overlapping lines and actors speaking in tandem, and Cotey sets a breakneck pace that matches Ariel's own dazzling speed.

Excepting a few small opening-night glitches, the cast keeps up - transporting us back to a lost kingdom we never knew, while promising Milwaukee a future in which emerging theater companies like this one breathe new life into the dream of a common language.

~ *Mike Fischer*

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Milwaukee Magazine – Culture Club April 26, 2010

Review: Spirits to Enforce – The Revels Never End

There's a bit of "Saturday Night Live" (or perhaps "Monty Python") to the setup of *Spirits to Enforce*, Youngblood Theatre's joy ride of a production that opened this weekend. Twelve superheroes, stranded in a submarine, stage a telemarketing drive to raise money for their production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Cue Will Ferrell in a bodysuit and cape.

But playwright Mickle Maher has more on his mind than simple TV-style yucks. As his play goes its merry way, it enters a language-rich dream world that draws inspiration from comic-book morality tales, Shakespeare, and from the great globe itself—a world in which the noble pursuit of storytelling promises to defeat the bad guys and save the world.

Maher is founder of Chicago's Theater Oobleck and frequent collaborator with the city's more innovative companies, and his plays reflect his restlessness with traditional forms. Almost all the dialogue in *Spirits* is spoken to the unseen "customers" at the other end of the telemarketing calls (and when two characters do talk to each other, they do so over the telephone). As such, the play is structured more like a piece of chamber music than a traditional drama. The "patter" of the calls is echoed from one caller to another, and the narrative behind the scene evolves piece by piece. We gradually learn about each superhero's special powers, and about which role they'll play in *The Tempest*. And they even reveal their secret identities.

Or do they? As the show's music ebbs and flows toward its climactic face off between heroes and supervillains (lead by Dr. Cannibal, of course), the identities—secret and otherwise—slip and slide into each other. The struggle between hero and villain also becomes a battle between art and life, the real and the imaginary, and even between Shakespeare and Mickle Maher. Flights of poetry—from both playwrights—merge with telemarketing banalities, and even Marvel-esque comic lingo in a way that seems to tell several stories at once. But once the revels are ended, you feel like something earth-shattering has taken place.

It's no easy undertaking, and one of the pleasures of *Spirits to Enforce* is the thrill that Milwaukee now has a theater company to take on a piece like this. Youngblood Artistic Director Michael Cotey gets energy, precision and imaginative flourishes out of his cast, which includes Youngblood members David Rothrock and Tess Cinpinski, as well as T. Stacy Hicks, Cathryn Melvin and April Paul. It's unlike anything you've seen in Milwaukee in quite a few years. And it's more than welcome.

~ *Paul Kosidowski*

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Third Coast Digest

April 25, 2010

Review: Youngblood Theatre runs deep for laughs

Clouds of boredom and despair hang over the 12 phone solicitors, all in a row at one long table in a dingy boiler room. Not a speck of red ink mars the thermometer progress chart on the wall behind them.

It turns out they're trying to raise money for a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Then it turns out they're raising money for a band of superheroes who want to put on the play. Then they sort of become the superheroes/actors, who turn out to be descended from the characters in *Shakes....* Wait. That would be telling.

Let's just say that 12 Youngblood Theatre actors deftly blend their hybrid characters, who change entirely over the course of the play yet somehow retain core personalities shown at the outset. A good part of the fun of Mickle Maher's *Spirits to Enforce* — and it's loads of fun — lies in seeing which aspects those personalities pop up next.

That ties in with language. The solicitors have a script — the pitch — they direct to their reluctant patrons on the other end of the phone. They speak to one another in more mundane language. But as curtain time for the imaginary superhero Shakespeare production draws near, more and more actual Shakespeare slips into that script. And as they slip into their superhero personae, comic-book fantasy language gets into the mix.

This is a complicated play, and you'd think it would be hard to follow. It's not. Maher, the playwright, gives each character distinctive rhythm and content. You get the idea of who they are very quickly, and not because they're stereotypes. You haven't seen these people in sitcoms. OK, I'll tell: You've seen them in Shakespeare, but not as phone solicitors. Maher reveals their lineage ever so slowly and cleverly. The connections are at once so outrageous and so apt that you'll laugh out loud when you make them.

Maher's ear for music is as sharp as his ear for language. He orchestrated the 12-part chatter. It sometimes overlaps in counterpoint, sometimes works in unison, sometimes focuses on a single voice and sometimes crescendos into a lovely, indecipherable cacophony. Director Michael Cotey and his cast played it the way Edo de Waart and the MSO play Beethoven, with an ease and abandon borne of discipline and skill.

The piece rises to a riotously funny climax as the entire company joins in a thrilling account of the disasters and triumphs of opening night, played to a venomous audience of archenemy Dr. Cannibal (to be confused with Caliban) and his henchmen. It's unbelievable, in both senses of the word. It is also entirely believable; we go to the theater because we want to suspend disbelief. This play draws you in with tiny leaps in logic that eventually land you on Fantasy Island. The joke's on you, and you'll laugh and laugh.

Here is the cast, and I love 'em all: Tess Cinpinski, Sara Zeintek, Kyle Gallagher-Schmitz, Daniel Koester, April Paul, Gracie DeWolff, T. Stacy Hicks, Cathlyn Melvin, Adrian Feliciano, Mike Loranger, David Rothrock and Dustin Schmaus.

~ *Tom Strini*

Youngblood Reviews for... **SPIRITS TO ENFORCE**

OnMilwaukee.com – Reader Blogs April 24, 2010
SPIRITS TO ENFORCE a “Kick-Ass” Play

Youngblood is back in a big way. A big script, a big cast and to big accolades.

What do you get when you mix 12 superheroes, a submarine and William Shakespeare? Well, it's called SPIRITS TO ENFORCE. That description alone makes this one-act play sound like a farce, and while it's funny and fantastical the story winds The Bard and the best of pop-culture together in an action-packed, modern masterpiece. Playwright Mickie Maher, co-founder of Chicago's Theater Oobleck, orchestrates 12 characters' personas together, most often as a symphony speaking over each other, as they tele-fundraise for a production of THE TEMPEST that the superheroes plan to mount. Yep, the premise is odd, but the product is delicious.

At Friday night's performance, Playwright Maher was in the audience along with several of Milwaukee's theatre veterans: The Rep's Jim Pickering, Chamber's Jacque Troy, Quasi-Productions Director Tom Reed, all who will be mounting a real production of Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST this summer at Alverno. If that isn't pressure to deliver, I don't know what is. And deliver Youngblood does.

"This play is a beast," said Playwright Maher during the talk-back following. "And this [production] looks like what I envision in my head. Michael's a born director."

He's referring to Youngblood Founding Artistic Director Michael Cotey. Cotey was joined by fellow founder Tess Cipinski, on stage as "The Silhouette" and on-hand were the rest of Youngblood's founders, Andrew Voss, Ben Wilson and Rich Gillard (after he finished rehearsal for UWM's upcoming HAY FEVER).

The script is by far the star of the show, and Cotey direction makes it shine. But, the ensemble of 12 is first-rate in their comedic and heart-felt performances. Classical actor T. Stacey Hicks took center-stage, literally, in what he calls one of the few modern plays he's done in a long time. Youngblood favorite David Rothrock brings a bit of romance to the stage as "The Tune" and Sarah Zientek tickles as "The Bad Map," a role you have to see to truly appreciate. UWM Sophomore, Kyle Gallagher-Schmitz (aka "Fragrance Fellow") told me afterwards "Jim Pickering said he's a fan of my work! Jim Pickering!" New to Milwaukee's theater scene, Adrian Feliciano and Mike Loranger ("The Untangler" and "The Intoxicator" respectively) said after the show they were both honored to have been cast alongside such a great ensemble. The whole cast really delivers.

~ *David Todd*

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Shepherd Express

April 23, 2010 & April 24, 2010

Spirits to Enforce Reviewed Part One: Accessibly Inaccessible

Actors, Super Heroes and Shakespeare: SPIRITS TO ENFORCE Reviewed Pt. 2

Part 1: Another Thoroughly Entertaining Youngblood Theatre Show

Youngblood Theatre's *Spirits To Enforce* opened last night to a near sell-out crowd. The Superhero/Shakespeare drama/comedy fusion piece was received quite well by the audience. Chicago playwright Mickle Maher's script is easily one of the best I've ever seen staged. *Spirits To Enforce* brilliantly mixes the accessible with the inaccessible in a script so packed with details that it could easily stand-up to numerous trips to the theatre and numerous productions. The Youngblood Theatre production cleverly assembles all those clever little details into an exceedingly entertaining production. Stuff like this so rarely gets produced that it would be kind of tragic if the show wasn't nearly sold-out every evening.

And in spite of the fact that there was a near-unanimous standing ovation for opening night, it's safe to say that the play isn't for everyone. I loved the script for reasons that were pretty specific to me, which is not altogether uncommon for pieces as generally esoteric as Maher's *Spirits To Enforce* . . . everyone who likes these types of shows likes them for personal reasons . . .

TELEFUNDRAISING AND THE ARTS

The plot concerns a group of mostly out of costume superheroes who are making calls to raise funds and sell tickets for their upcoming production of *Tempest*. We, the audience are watching them as they make calls in something sort of like real time. With the studio theatre space being as intimate as it is, the audience enters into an alarmingly authentic call center atmosphere.

I know the call center is authentic because I've been there. I've done this sort of work. I've raised money for the various arts groups . . . out of state places like the Kennedy Center, closer to home, I'd done calls for UPAF (once inadvertently called actor Norman Moses and asked him for a donation . . .) I've sold tickets for the Milwaukee Symphony and the Milwaukee Ballet among others. Youngblood director Michael Cotey has the atmosphere pretty much nailed. The audience walks-in and immediately you see the low-budget office atmosphere of a arts fundraising outfit . . . this happens to be on a superhero group's submarine, but you still have the cheap phones, the cheap coffee, the cramped conditions . . .

Evan Crain's scenic design does a really good job of fusing the call center atmosphere with the dark feel of a contemporary superhero drama . . . the team in question—the Enforcers have a rather clever logo that can be seen on the walls and bits of costuming . . . the team's initials look like twin fortresses with a dozen tiny, little slits at the top of them—one for each member of the team.

Eleanor Kingsely's costume design is subtle enough . . . all dozen members of the tem are dressed pretty comfortably, largely out of costume, but with a few clever details thrown-in here and there. It may not live-up to the truly bizarre fashions found at some of the stranger independent call centers I've been to . . . I've worked alongside the facially tattooed, the pre-op and post-op transgendered individuals, young conservatives, men who look like old TV news anchors, people who insist on wearing pajamas to work for good luck. (And these were some of the most productive call centers I'd ever worked.) The call center atmosphere of *Spirits To Enforce* may not have quite that kind of atmosphere, but show's director Michael Cotey has done a brilliant job of getting together a really, really talented group of people to carry the show's rather novel call-center feel through a full ninety minutes without intermission.

Theatre is some modification to the traditional atmosphere and prospective audiences may be somewhat relieved to know that though this play has a non-traditional plot structure, it DOES modify the workplace atmosphere quite a bit for the sake of bringing across a story. And though

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the more sophisticated bits of call center humor are conspicuously absent here, there is quite a bit of humor here that is very specific to telefundraising in general and fundraising for the arts in particular. The brilliant thing that Maher does here in and amidst everything else is . . . he explores the need to ask strangers for money for the performing arts and how truly bizarre that really is . . . what it says about our culture as a whole. In [and] amidst everything else, Maher explores the nature of arts fundraising at a startling depth. Once one gets beyond the initially strange atmosphere, *Spirits To Enforce* has quite a bit to say about the innate need for art. It's very captivating stuff.

Part 2: More Thoughts on the New Youngblood Production

There's no doubt that Youngblood Theatre is taking a few chances staging the somewhat inaccessibly strange *Spirits To Enforce*. A show that fuses Shakespearian drama with the superhero genre may come across to many as something of a bastardization of both. As executed by Youngblood, however, the play comes across with a striking clarity that really plays-up the unique qualities of theatre in an intimate, studio theatre production.

SUPER HEROES ON THE SMALL STAGE

The idea of having super heroes in a small-budget production theatrical production conjures campy images of Adam West in grey sweat-stained tights. Youngblood's *Spirits To Enforce* illustrates some of the range of possibilities that intimate, small-budget theatre offers the super hero genre. A quick glance at the characters:

Tess Cinpinski as The Silhouette: Youngblood co-founder Cinpinski continues to show a remarkable amount of talent in a very subtle role. The character she's playing helps establish the overall mood—there's a malaise amongst the heroes as they've just put away their biggest threat . . . and The Silhouette is sullen . . . her costume seems much more enthusiastic than she does . . . and Cinpinski is very subtle about her overall lack of enthusiasm. It might not even have been all that apparent on a bigger stage, but Cinpinski seems to know she doesn't need to emote much to get the mood across.

Sarah Zientek as the Bad Map: On first glance, the character is little more than psychologically imbalanced, but there's a real kind of chaos about her perpetual disorder that seems to effect things pretty profoundly. Zientek has a disorienting charm about her in the role.

Kyle Gallagher-Schmitz as Fragrance Fellow: Gallagher-Schmitz is one of the younger members of the cast. A sophomore at UWM, he shows a good deal of promise here as a guy with olfactory manipulation powers. The ability to emanate any kind of scent may seem kind of odd, but the character's presence calls attention to sensory capacity rarely appealed to by any art. Interesting.

Daniel Koester as The Pleaser: A man capable of making people feel good through force of will alone must be extremely daunting to have to play in an intimate setting, but Koester tackles it with admirable poise. Koester's nice guy presence adds an interesting counterpoint to some of the darker nervous tension in the play.

April Paul as Memory Lass: There is quite a bit of Cute in the production and Paul is responsible for a fair amount of it. The fact that it never gets overly grating is quite an accomplishment on her end. One might think that a person who can remember everything with presumably perfect clarity would be a little bitter. Paul makes the overall good-natured personality of the character seem authentic.

Grace DeWolff as The Page: Nearly graduated UWM student Grace DeWolff is a lot of fun in the role of one of the central two anchors of the call center. DeWolff has a charm about her as The Page that serves as part of the emotional center of the play. She carries herself with a very approachable kind of authority in the role. Exactly what she's doing here is a bit difficult to define, but she doing a great deal at the play's thematic center.

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T. Stacey Hicks as Ariel: A talented actor with a great deal of experience in actual Shakespeare plays, Hicks adds a functional gravitas to the cast that anchors the whole thing beautifully. That Hicks is able to do this—that he is able to play Ariel without any form of costuming is really, really impressive. The dialogue that the playwright has Ariel speaking goes a long way, but the fact that Hicks is able to convincingly come across as Ariel clean-shaven with short hair in modern business casual attire is . . . well, it's just really, really impressive. Hicks' performance here makes me miss Milwaukee Shakespeare—an experience I haven't had in a while . . .

Cathlyn Melvin as The Ocean: Melvyn holds down her end of the Cute quite well as . . . the Ocean. Precisely which ocean is irrelevant. A large, unforgiving body of water could've theoretically been played quite differently, but Maher chooses to make have the ocean take the form of a cute, young woman with a very poetic sense of dialogue. I know I've seen her in plays at UWM before, but Melvin really makes a strong impression here.

Adrian F. Feliciano as The Untangler: Talented UWM alumni Feliciano plays a man who waxes poetic about knots and other entanglements. The Untangler ends up coming across as one of the more interesting characters due to Feliciano's simple, straightforward delivery of dialogue. With the character's philosophy being as evidently bizarre as it is, it would've been all too easy to deliver the dialogue with campy excess. Feliciano plays it very reserved, cleverly avoiding this.

Mike Loranger as the Intoxicator: A hero whose power lies in intoxicating others could've been overplayed as well, but relative newcomer Loranger, like Feliciano, is pretty reserved. Playing the roles as straight ahead drama allows the comedy to come out in subtle textures and shadows.

David Rothrock as The Tune: Nothing beats a catchy melody. The Tune is a dashing sonic guy who can . . . well . . . the really cool thing about Rothrock's performance here is that it explores an aspect of the super hero genre concisely enough that it amplifies the universality of it . . . how people only see you for what they can get out of you . . . the tenuous romance between he and Memory Lass is really touching . . . and surprisingly deep considering how quickly and convincingly it establishes itself even though Rothrock and Paul are on opposite ends of the stage and never actually meet face to face onstage.

Dustin Schmaus as the Snow Heavy Branch: Schmaus is another new actor. His character seemed a bit like a recurring surrealist joke, but he carries it pretty well. Much of the subtlety that there may have been in his performance was lost on me, he was the furthest actor from me. (I sat almost directly across from Cinpinski on the other side.) This brings up one of the few problems with the production:

Sit too far on one end and you'll miss things going on at the other end . . . and those in the middle probably have a similar experience . . . crammed with a great many details, you're inevitably going to miss quite a lot . . . and this is definitely a play I'd like to see again . . . but the proximity to the actors brings tiny little faults in the performance into sharp relief. As the script isn't written to include every detail of every conversation going on between everyone onstage for the entire length of the play (which would be a complete headache all the way through the show) the overall experience of the production has to fuse together. The attention of the audience should flow effortlessly from one end of the table to the next . . . and with the audience being as close as it is to the actors, it's very difficult to feel the overall gestalt of the piece. One ends up getting lost in the details and the reality of the piece gets lost in the details as they haven't been written into the script to be continuous enough to feel completely authentic. If all this sounds like it's splitting hairs, it is. This is an amazing show. I loved it. Like anything, it's flawed. And putting it into perspective, the show ends up feeling at certain angles like ninety minutes worth of exposition. It's all being talked about post-hoc . . . or not . . . the brilliantly ambiguous timeline of the play fuses past with present with future, so we're getting one, big Greek Chorus explaining everything. It's hypnotic.

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SHAKESPEARE

The Shakespeare angle is pretty heavy throughout . . . as Cotey said, it's integral to Spirits To Enforce, which ends up being a very exceedingly good modern sequel to The Tempest: one of Shakespeare's most original works. What makes Spirits such a good sequel is the fact that it stand alone as well as it does. All too often a sequel of any kind is an attempt to make a good sequel . . . not a good standalone work that happens to follow-up on the success of an original. In crating a modern continuation of the story that brings the premise into the modern world, Maher has created a post-modernist fusion of ancient poetry and modern atonal, atune-al music. Philip Glass and Jack Kirby meet Shakespeare with a few hints of something even more interesting . . . a really, really fun show.

~ Russ Bickerstaff

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