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Geoff Hoyle and Annie Abrams star in Stanford Summer Theater's production of "Lysistrata."

Long on comedy?

Stanford Summer Theater's 'Lysistrata' proceeds by fits and starts

by Jeanie Forte

One of the oldest comedies in Western literature, "Lysistrata," has recently enjoyed a comeback as anti-war protest. In March, the Lysistrata Project coordinated more than a thousand readings of the play worldwide in reaction to the imminent aggression in Iraq.

Yet, as anti-war literature, it's a rather odd choice. When playwright Aristophanes penned the piece in 411 B.C. he was satirizing the continued senselessness of the Peloponnesian Wars, which had been going on for more than 20 years. But whether Aristophanes thought of his play as serious protest is debatable; it's one of the bawdiest, silliest plays ever written.

The play's recent resurgence sparked Stanford Professor Rush Rehm's interest in a modern adaptation. He enlisted playwright Amy Freed ("The Bard of Avon," "Freedomland") and composer Bruce Barthol (of the San Francisco Mime Troupe) in rejuvenating and updating the comedy. The result is the current production of the Stanford Summer Theater, which runs through Aug. 9.

The premise has Athenian women, fed up with the war, barricading themselves in the Acropolis citadel, tying up the treasury, thus curtailing funds for war. Lysistrata, whose name means something akin to liberator, engineers the rebellion. To make sure that they're heard, they refuse to have sex with their men until peace is reached. Raunchy conflict ensues, be-

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tween the men driven to desperation and the women determined to bring them to their senses.

The production gets off to a slow start, with military marching and chanting, seemingly in an attempt to draw parallels between ancient Athens and present-day United States. A large projection screen shows slides both before and during the show, informing us of Bush's paradoxical statements, the cost of war, the fallacies in current U.S. foreign policy and the lack of any attempt at peaceful diplomacy. The slides also show scenes from Athens.

Once the text of the play starts, the brilliant comedy of Aristophanes via Freed takes over, and we are introduced to Lysistrata's outrageous plan and her over-sexed cohorts. The actresses in this production are delightfully committed to the bawdiness required of them. Anne Gregory's Lysistrata is earnest and intelligent, while Annie Abrams, Audrey Dundee Hannah, Mandy Khoshnevisan, and Kay Kostopoulos are hilarious in their over-the-top characterizations.

Geoff Hoyle does his expert comic turn, of Lampushka, a less-than-feminine foreigner who rallies her countrywomen to the cause. He also is a wonderfully

randy and clueless Lord Testicle, the Athenian leader pitted against Lysistrata.

After the initial scene, however, the play proceeds by fits and starts — often rousing funny in one scene, only to fall oddly flat in the next. The exchanges between the Old Man and Old Woman — leaders of their respective choruses who fall in love with one another — seem almost from another play, and their connection to the overall action isn't clear. While some comic bits are perfectly staged, other opportunities are lost. For example, the "Fever" musical number is clearly a tango, but is staged rather statically.

The stunning centerpiece of the play is the scene between Myrrhine (Abrams) and her husband, Kinesias (Geoff Sobelle). Myrrhine agrees to tease her husband, who is literally long suffering with a giant erection, in order to intensify his desire and thus bring him closer to surrender. The actors and Rehm deliver the funniest version of this scene ever; from start to finish, it's a comic masterpiece, one that had the audience roaring with laughter. It's actually worth the price of admission alone — it's that good. I know I'll remember it with a laugh for many years to come.

Freed's adaptation delivers clever updates of the references and funny character names. Overall, it seems a workable rendition, true to the original, with her own zany comic sense thrown in. However, this production commingles the tactics of Bertolt Brecht, the German political playwright, with Aristophanes in a way that seems heavy-handed and pedantic, with Brechtian use of polemical slides and deadly serious interventions into the comedy. The bizarre new ending doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the piece; whatever it was, it was a weird idea to tack on to this otherwise one-issue romp.

I would encourage the collaborators to make another pass at the concept, to get rid of the awkward anachronisms and stick with the genius of Aristophanes, rendered contemporary by Freed. But I would also encourage local audiences to see the show for themselves, to take it for what it is, and thus to enjoy a good laugh. ■

WHAT: Aristophanes' "Lysistrata." Presented by Stanford Summer Theater, the production features a new adaptation by playwright Amy Freed.

WHERE: Stanford University's Pigott Theater, adjacent to Memorial Auditorium.

WHEN: Through Aug. 9. Show times are Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 7 p.m.; 2 p.m. matinees on Aug. 2 and 9.

COST: Tickets are \$25.

INFO: Call (650) 725-ARTS or visit www.stanfordtheater.org