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Features



The team behind Test: Stephen Near, Adrianna Prosser, Leeman Kessler, Phil Rickaby

Get us to the geek

Playwrights don't often turn to videogaming or live action role-playing for inspiration. But a local theatre festival specializes in exploring the dramatic possibilities of subculture obsessions

BY PAUL GALLANT April 06, 2011 12:04

In the effort to get at universal truths, some theatre creators suggest that culture and human interests are eternal. Sometimes that's true. Change the costumes and, voila, *Hamlet* can work in 21st-century Los Angeles. Throw some rocks onto the stage and, presto, *Waiting for Godot* is about cave dwellers. But sometimes it's the very specificity of time, place and subcultural passions that gets to the heart of what it is to be human.

For example, growing up in the 1970s and '80s, Hamilton-based playwright Stephen Near started participating in the role-playing games that were coming onto the market. "I played *Dungeons and Dragons* in my teens like everyone else in geek culture," he says. In the mid-1990s, he took part in live action role-playing games—known as LARPs—in which players inhabit characters and fantasy storylines in real-world venues. Players in a medieval-themed LARP might dress up in makeshift armour and run around the woods hitting each other with Styrofoam swords, throwing rice as a substitute for fairy dust. Participants in a vampire LARP might play at undead politics in a nightclub. Our grandparents would consider LARPing absurd. But with three LARP-inspired plays under his belt, Near believes the phenomenon is full of onstage possibilities. How do rivalries, friendships and love affairs in the game seep out into real life? How does real life feed into the game? In our age of multiple social-networking personas, questions like this can be as relevant as "to be or not to be."

That's what the team behind Monkeyman Productions hopes to prove with its pop-culture-focused theatre festival, The Simian Showcase, which presents four short plays by four far-flung playwrights, running from April 8 to 16 at the Imperial Pub. In Near's contribution, *Test*, two characters who had fallen in love both inside and outside a vampire LARP reunite at a LARPer convention. They might be expressive when they're in character, but communicating their real-life feelings is more difficult.

"They remove their masks and talk to each other very frankly," says Near, whose most prominent LARP role is that of a suit-wearing sorcerer who works to keep people ignorant of all the hidden magic in their midst. "There's a shared experience, a shared language between them that doesn't have to be explained."

Rebecca Nesvet, a writer and academic currently based in North Carolina, also believes that these obsessions are worth exploring. Her showcase contribution, *Double or Nothing*, is about a real-life 19th-century newspaper publisher, Leigh Hunt; Nesvet imagines that he has access to a machine that can help him through a jail sentence. A self-proclaimed geek who thinks that playwrights often overlook the importance of science and technology in our lives, Nesvet wrote the play in the sci-fi subgenre of steampunk, which has a few typical premises: electricity didn't sweep aside steam as a power source; petroleum didn't become the defining element of our society (bye-bye, plastic!); and the Victorians might have had computer technology. Writers William Gibson and Bruce Sterling are seen as the movement's founders, though French novelist Jules Verne is obviously the godfather (steam-punks love balloon travel) and 2009's Robert Downey Jr.-infused *Sherlock Holmes* is the aesthetic's most recent mainstream Hollywood embodiment.

"Machines shape what happens to the human heart," says Nesvet via Skype. "We interact so much through our machines, and I'm not talking about Facebook. If you've met someone from another country, it's because planes exist. I'm particularly interested in the science of the past because there's still an idealism, a sense of magic in it."

Although there are indeed steampunk LARPs, Nesvet says that it's passion—not the specific categories of geek interests—that links the plays at the Simian Showcase, which also include short works about video games and time travel.

"What I find boring in pop culture is stuff that has no enthusiasm," says Nesvet. "Reality TV is about boring people doing boring things. There are so many formulaic police dramas. But geeks bring real enthusiasm. After all, Hamlet was a geek in a way, obsessing over everything."

The Simian Showcase

Double or Nothing features Scott Clarkson, Kat Letwin, Simon Pond and Valen Steer. Written by Rebecca Nesvet. Directed by Janina Kowalski. *Test* features Leeman Kessler and Adrianna Prosser. Written by Stephen Near. Directed by Phil Rickaby. Presented by Monkeyman Productions. \$10 for all four plays. Runs Apr 8, 9, 15 & 16, 8pm; April 10, 2pm; April 16, 11pm. Imperial Pub. 54 Dundas E. monkeymanproductions.com

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