

Aquila Theatre Company

N.C. State University Center Stage: Aquila Theatre Company's Dramatization of Catch-22 Captured All the Quirks of Joseph Heller's Comic Novel

by Robert W. McDowell

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Yossarian lives! The Aquila Theatre Company's marvelous multimedia dramatization of *Catch-22*, presented Oct. 9th in Stewart Theatre by N.C. State University Center Stage, captured all the quirks of Joseph Heller's wonderfully wacky World War II novel about the insanity of wars and the shortsightedness and stupidity of the military bureaucracies that prosecute them — and pay a horrific price in blood and shattered lives of officers, enlisted men, and civilians. Peter Meineck, the New York City-based theater troupe's artistic director, has imaginatively revamped and revitalized novelist Joseph Heller's own 1971 stage adaptation of his 1961 novel about American aviators making sometimes suicidal bombing runs on key European targets from an island off the coast of Italy.

Catch-22 is a crowd-pleasing black comedy, punctuated by an eye-catching sampling of motion-picture footage from B-25 bombing runs and related still photographs — projected on a giant rear screen between and during the scenes — plus a choice selection of musical snippets from World War II and more modern hits. Together, these images and sounds underscore the absurdist humor and occasional pathos of the events depicted.

Meineck, who doubles as the show's lighting designer, combines with technical director Ryan Brooke, costume designer Sarah Cabbage, and sound designer Duncan Cutler to give *Catch-22* a splendid staging. Their evocation of the cockpit and bombardier's bubble of the B-25 bomber in which Yossarian flies mission after mission, braving storms of flak and bullets from German fighters, is an ingenious two-story construction of the front end of a B-25, with Yossarian peering into his bomb site, his face strobed by flashes from the bombs that the B-25 has dropped. The plane's pilot and co-pilot are seated above Yossarian, and the B-25's waist and tail gunners sit on office chairs on rollers, in a rectangle of light, behind the set piece, where they can constantly swivel to spot and strafe German fighters.

Steve Stout is a hoot as U.S. Army Air Corps Capt. John Yossarian, a burnt-out bombardier who has an Armenian surname but claims Assyrian ancestry; and Richard Sheridan Willis is hilarious as the hopelessly hypochondriacal squadron physician Doc Daneeka, who tells the war-weary Yossarian that he cannot classify him as crazy via Section 8, excuse him from combat duty, and send him home, because of the infamous "Catch-22." That is, "Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."

Stout gives a wonderfully warm and funny performance as Yossarian; and Willis not only makes an indelible impression as Doc Daneeka, but also is delightful as the ever-elusive squadron commander Major Major Major Major and the tough Old Man who runs the squadron's favorite Roman brothel. Reginald Metcalf is highly amusing as the squadron's vainglorious group commander, Col. Cathcart, who keeps upping the number of missions that must be flown before Yossarian and company can return to the United States; and Charles Goforth is a scream as the Texan who works for military intelligence, the drolly officious ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, and Col. Cathcart's sycophantic and somewhat sinister assistant Lt. Col. Korn.

Marc LeVasseur smoothly balances the angst of the increasingly troubled group Chaplain with the outrageous antics of Yossarian's nosy navigator "Aarfy" Aardvark; Daniel Marmion (sharing multiple roles with Teddy Alvaro) is delightful as the ever-mercenary mess officer Lt. Milo Minderbinder and 19-year-old boy Lt. Nately; Amanda Catania is a scream as Luciana the crazy Roman whore and an Old Woman; and Stephanie Dodd is terrific as beautiful Nurse Duckett, whom Yossarian chases until she catches him, and Nately's Whore, a homicidal lunatic who blames Yossarian for her boyfriend's death.

Thanks to Peter Meinick's restoration of scenes from the novel and resequencing of the play to follow the book's nonlinear dramatic arc, *Catch-22* has a very good chance of graduating from work-in-progress on tour to a hit on Broadway or in London's West End. The highly energetic production that played Stewart Theatre on Oct. 9th was a real treat for the N.C. State University Center Stage audience.

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