

Animal Farm

Review by Donna Reese

I'm glad elections are over for a while. It's wonderful to feel the flush of civic pride you get while standing in the booth punching on that little card, but I was getting tired. Really, how long did it take you to read your voter's pamphlet? How well could you tell the difference between the Democrat and the Republican, between the pro and the con? The debates, the updates, the mudslinging, the lawn signs, the jingles, those embarrassing political commercials—they're more confusing than clarifying after a bit. The politicians grope for the best way to say the right thing, and the voters talk about lesser-of-evils as their choice.

It's no John Wayne film out there. There's no black hat hugging the head of the bad guy who is over in that corner. No siree. It is a mass of contradiction, a jungle of grey, all the time reminding us of how fragile is our "power."

I never thought there might be a day where the work of George Orwell would be comforting to me. Thought-provoking undoubtedly; nothing so sweet as comfort. But the University Theatre's presentation of *Animal Farm* is so timely that there is a comfort in seeing the silliness of politics so well articulated.

Peter Hall has taken Orwell's heady, acrid book and adapted it to a rather unlikely two-act musical play. The National Theatre of Great Britain has been performing the piece for over a year now, to very enthusiastic English audiences. The University production is a Northwest pre-

miere.

Director Gray Eubank has an obvious appreciation for the material, and high hopes for it. He has chosen to prompt a sort of Saturday-morning-cartoon feeling from this rendition, and it is risky. Unlike a cartoon, the action here is subservient to the word. There's not a lot of motion or flash, no big costume changes, nothing to pace it like a cartoon. The narrator (Jason Buell) and the pianist (Al Villanueva) do scout things along nicely and soften the edges, but it's not exactly playful.

As could be expected, the play is full of animals and this is where another challenge arises. The animal masks (by David Apple) are very inventive and effective visually, but they do, especially in the case of the horses, muffle the singing.

There are some strong performances from Renate Ruby as Clover, Brad Mead as Boxer, Elizabeth Ann Cable as Mollie, and Cole-Arthur Hornaday as Squealer the pig. Almost all the actors have multiple roles as various animals and occasional humans. David Apple's set design is flexible and fluent, and Nancy Julian's costumes are pleasingly simple.

More performances will help blend the far-reaching edges of this endeavor together. It is a rich and important piece, one that exposes much of ourselves to us, one that reminds us to keep our feet on the ground, to search for the truth of the truth, and to beware of becoming that which we hope to overcome.



Photograph by John Daugirda

"Animal Farm" performed in a musical version is presented by the University Theater.

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