

THEATER

Making the invisible visible

Toad City Productions takes on Rumi

BY BART CHURCH

Rumi is hot, and his poetry is being brought to life through Dec. 20 by Toad City Productions.

Rumi was a 13th century poet who was married, had children and led a large religious school—and he loved three men so much that he wrote almost every one of his 12,000 passionate poems to or about them.

Rumi was a Sufi—a follower of a special form of Islamic mysticism—and his work is experiencing an unprecedented renaissance. He has been the best-selling poet in the United States for several years. In large portions of the Middle East, more people can recite Rumi's poetry than the Koran. Nearly 750 years after his death, he remains one of the world's most influential spiritual leaders.

The current popularity, though, doesn't make bringing his work to the stage easy. Coleman Barks, a poetry professor and modern Sufi, freed Rumi's poetry from the arcane translations that made the work inaccessible to English readers until this decade.

The poems are full of metaphor; in order to embody them as performance, actors have to deeply understand the many levels of meaning. This is a tall order for community theater, where rehearsal time is limited and actors tend to be less experienced.

In the Middle East, people spend their whole lives memorizing and reciting Rumi's poetry by heart. In the United States, his writing has a dedicated following of millions. So people who love Rumi come to this production with high expectations—as do those looking for interesting fringe theater.

"Like a lot of people, I have a hard time reading poetry," says gay actor John McCarthy, "but I can really relate to it when it is acted out, when it is brought to life. This show makes powerful poetry accessible."

Sometimes this show delivers on this promise. Sometimes it doesn't.

The eight actors in *Rumi* use an experimental theater technique called Spolin Improvisation, which relies on the use of almost no props and a mime-like process of working with invisible objects to make them visible to the audience. While the cast is quite accomplished at this technique, and it is useful and fun for interpreting a highly metaphorical work, sometimes the actors don't seem to understand the deeper meaning of the words and actions they're portraying.



John McCarthy interprets Rumi through Dec. 20 at Backdoor Theater

Then sometimes the show works beautifully, as in a piece called "The Mouse and the Frog," where the adorable Matthew Combs plays a needy mouse in love with a freedom-loving frog, played by Jeff DeGreef. The actors portray the sweet tenderness and aching loyalty of two male friends/lovers whose desire to be close leads them to dire consequences—which neither regrets. This is the most homo of all the pieces and one of the sweetest.

Most of the stories in the show portray heterosexual situations and traditional gender roles—it was 13th century Islam, after all—but director Lorraine Bahr does mix things up a bit with a woman playing Moses and another woman (Adrienne Flagg) play an elderly sheik (Sufi teacher). Flagg produces the show and is one of its strongest actors. Michael Brickler, who also is a seasoned member of Toad City, is strong as (another) Moses and as a rambunctious camel.

All of the cast members play many different roles, and they change characters in the blink of an eye—quite extraordinary in a tiny theater space with almost no props. One amazing transformation is when DeGreef becomes a psychic cock (rooster) and Combs a dog. Their characterizations are lively and poignant.

If you're looking for a deeply moving rendi-

Holiday Garland

Christmas at triangle is all Judy, Judy, Judy

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

I can just picture the incarnation of *Judy's Scary Little Christmas*: Imagine the holidays at a Tinseltown Darcelle's where the nog eggs on every drag queen's favorite celluloid charade. Soon some ruby-shoed Dorothy and stagedoor Mickey scream, "Let's put on a show!" And off they go, digging through costumes and bickering over billing while resurrecting a plot that's not even six feet deep.

OK, not *that* plot, but an equally rapid vehicle to showcase everyone's well-worn, one-note parodies.

Onstage at triangle productions! through Dec. 21, *Judy's* imagines a career comeback by the esteemed Judy Garland as host of one of those ubiquitous holiday specials from television's golden age. We're the studio audience for a broadcast brimming with standard trimmings from musical numbers, celebrity guests and off-camera banter.

But when a "mysterious" backstage spook is revealed to be Death itself, a tedious *Twilight Zone* twist recounts each star's demise before sending them all packing—save Judy, who first must learn a lesson about the value of her life.

Drammy Award winner Tony James carries the titular role with unguarded presence and throaty verve. His comic timing is lithe, anchoring fellow cast members without holding them back. He fondly pokes fun, nudging us old-schoolers to think maybe now, looking back, Judy might enjoy laughing at herself, too.

Ensemble members—often gender cross-cast—dutifully create amusing albeit waifish satires of glitteringly fey Liberace, brass-and-boobs Ethel Merman, talk-taxing Richard



You see, Judy, you really had a wonderful life: triangle productions! stages *Judy's Scary Little Christmas* through Dec. 21

Nixon, melodramatic Joan Crawford and rough-and-tumble Lillian Hellman.

But what were televised holiday specials without a puppet, a serviceman and goofy chorus numbers? Better probably, as would've been *Judy's Grim Reaper* had he been fit with a character other than standard-issue cloak and scythe (though be on your toes for his clever feat).

A *Christmas Carol* this is not, but to some that's a gift in itself. **J**

JUDY'S SCARY LITTLE CHRISTMAS continues through Dec. 21 at Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$17-\$23 from 503-239-5919.

RUMI plays 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday through Dec. 20 at Backdoor Theater, 4321 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd. Tickets are \$10 from 503-736-1027, \$12 at the door.

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