

Citizens of the Prague gamble their way into heresy



RICH SCHEELAND

Whistling in the Dark

Humor, tragedy mark *Players*

Considering everything I had previously read about Very Little Theatre's Stage Left production of *Players in the Game* — dark and grim themes of religion, power, torture, guilt, Medieval inquisition, hypocrisy and zealotry — I was prepared for a profoundly depressing evening of theater. So I was pleasantly surprised by this West Coast premiere by playwright Dale Wasserman, who penned *Man of La Mancha* in 1966. Wasserman blends both the bleak and the blithe to craft a slice of history brought to life, a play that is educational, interesting and entertaining, masterfully combining droll dialogue with drama without diminishing the magnitude of its tragic themes.

The play is set in Prague in the 14th century, where adultery and gambling run ram-

pant under the local bishop (William Campbell). The bishop is a sinner himself who has been placed under papal ban for disobeying the church. But sin or even free thought are dangerous deeds during this time of Inquisition, when the Roman Catholic Church fears losing its power. In 1316, a new Lord Inquisitor, Jean Charlier (Chris McVay), arrives in town, sanctioned by the Pope of Avignon. A "sharp knife" sent to replace former inquisitor Brother Tavolo (Frank Long), who often let lawless-

ness slide, Charlier's zealous mission of fear is to preserve the untainted image of the church as the sole instrument of God's will on earth by encouraging the local people to divulge information about their neighbors to root out heresy. On a tip from Anna Sarban (Cate Wolfenbarger), a pious "rock of righteousness," the Lord Inquisitor learns of illicit gambling activity taking place in a house across town. That gambling operates under the guise of a religious order devoted to an obscure saint, whose name only the shameless and corrupt game organizer, Friar Waldo (Don Kelley) can pronounce. But the Lord Inquisitor disrupts the game and arrests six people in attendance: Gorizian (Tom Wilson); Ruthard (Rich Scheeland); Amiel (Steve Mandell); Adleta Vaselli (Nancy Boyett), a merchant's wife who is having an affair with legendary sinner and scoundrel Richard the Healer (Chris Gorton); and two whores from the bath house (Donella-Elizabeth Alston, Helene Morse), who are merely there to service the winners of the dice game. Rather than charging them with gambling, which would

fall under local jurisdiction and only require payment of a small fine, the Inquisitor instead charges the six with heresy, which carries a death sentence of "purification by fire," or burning at the stake. He wants to send a powerful message to the people that the Church and the Pope maintain sovereign control. Thus begins a turbulent political and religious "chess game" played between the Inquisitor and the bishop to decide the fate of the condemned.

A shoe-in for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Jean Luc-Picard, Campbell is fantastic as the disobedient and conflicted Bishop of Prague. With a flair for both high drama and wry humor, Campbell is a commanding and charismatic presence onstage. Wolfenbarger is terrific as the hypocritical Anna Sarban, who is quick to point fingers at others yet engages in an adulterous dalliance with Richard the Healer, who rejects his roguish life for love.

McVay's performance as the zealous Charlier is superb. Mandell is amusing as Amiel, a simple man who claims he has meditated on women, young boys, even sheep, but never religion; so are Kelly as the unscrupulous Waldo and Gil T. Rodello as Bruno, the bishop's volatile thug and body-guard.

Some performances work well in smaller spaces; Very Little Theatre's Stage Left location provides the ideal intimate venue for a play such as this. Minimal props, dim lighting and live harp music performed by David Helfand all serve to enhance the impressions and authenticity of a period piece set during the Dark Ages and create a sense of the underlying theme of fear as power — something as relevant today as it was in 1316. **EW**

Players in the Game continues April 26-29 and May 4 and 5. In addition, an audience talk-back session with the cast will follow the Saturday, April 28 matinee.

The Lord Inquisitor wants to send a powerful message that the church maintains control.

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