



MELANIE MOSER AND SHAWN BOOKEY IN VLT'S ANNE OF THE THOUSAND DAYS

## HOW TO GET AHEAD IN MONARCHY

VLT casts *Anne of the Thousand Days* as a post-apocalyptic feminist tale of Tudor intrigue

William Faulkner once suggested in an interview that the essential ingredients of any good drama are family, money and murder. This might help explain our ongoing obsession with the House of Tudor, those ingrown English monarchs whose rule included ample instances of greed, intrigue, betrayal and bloody battles for the rights of primogeniture.

Very Little Theatre in its current production not only taps our appetite for all things Tudor but ups the ante by reinterpreting *Anne of the Thousand Days* as a post-apocalyptic fable, adding a dash of *Mad Max* to this story about how Anne Boleyn lost her head.

Based on the 1948 play by Maxwell Anderson, the play transports the rule of Henry VIII (Shawn Bookey) to the distant future, where courtiers to the king look like renegades from *Burning Man* and a tatted-up Thomas Cromwell (Blake Beardsley) could stand in for *The Road Warrior's* Lord Humungus. It's a nice conceit, and director Jay Hash does a fine job of splicing Armageddon into the gilded treachery of the Renaissance.

The play opens with video footage of an imprisoned Anne Boleyn (the excellent Melanie Moser) awaiting execution. From here, the play darts back to the beginning

of the story: how the piggish, arrogant, oversexed Henry tries to take Anne as a mistress; how the furiously defiant Anne, all piss and vinegar, resists his advances, finally demanding to be made Queen of England before she submits; and how Henry risks papal displeasure to divorce his wife, the never-present Catherine of Aragon.

A slew of minor characters with ulterior motives works to complicate this tale full of religious hypocrisy, double- and triple-crosses and, not insignificantly, the wily maneuvering of Anne herself, who manipulates the king and his court to her advantage until at last everything blows up in her face. Her execution, which she views as an expiation of her sins, arrives at once as a shock and a fait accompli, a brutal outcome writ by the forces of fate.

Moser plays Anne as something of a feminist anti-hero, a woman who — faced with the seemingly indomitable force of patriarchy — plays the game until at last the game plays her. Impressively, VLT's production eschews any easy assessment of Anne's actions, casting her not as an icon but as a complex character who, in the end, may or may not get seduced by the temptations of absolute power. — *Rick Levin*

*Anne of the Thousand Days* plays through Aug. 15 at the Very Little Theatre; \$12-\$17, [thevlt.com](http://thevlt.com).

## VAUDEVILLE AT THE SHEDD

Revival of musical *Whoopie!* is zany good fun

Set in 1928 Arizona, The Shedd's revival of *Whoopie!* is populated by rootin' tootin' cowboys, rich tourists and the occasional hypochondriac.

Based on the 1923 play *The Nervous Wreck*, this goofball musical comedy by Gus Kahn and Walter Donaldson was made famous by both the Ziegfeld Broadway production of 1928 and the 1930 Eddie Cantor film.

In the vaudeville era, shows like *Whoopie!* cobbled together already popular tunes with a loose plot, peppering zany narratives with plenty of jazz standards and daffy jokes. And it's still a winning combination.

Peg Major directs this solid production, with staging that's crisp and silly and pacing that plows ahead in fifth gear.

Musical director Robert Ashens leads a fine 11-piece orchestra. Talented woodwinds, brass, bass and piano play these indelible songs with confidence and verve. Alan Phillips on banjo lends an authenticating twang, and Merlin Showalter charms with wide-ranging sound effects and percussions.

Anchoring the performance is Trevor Eichhorn as the neurotic Henry Williams. Eichhorn sets the bar high with his singing, dancing and comedic chops. Equally impressive, Kaitlyn Sage as Henry's nurse, Miss Custer, sings beautifully and brings a likable exasperation to every scene.

Stephanie Hawkins as Sally Morgan captivates with expressive physicality and perfect comic timing. Hawkins shines in her duet with Jim Ballard, "Out of the Dawn."

Mark Huisenga's set, featuring Connie Huston's cinematic painting, transports. Inventive props — a jalopy! another jalopy! a canoe! — are adorable. Jamie Parker's costumes are detailed and plentiful, like a postcard from the 1920s come to life.



STEPHANIE HAWKINS (LEFT), JIM BALLARD, KAITLYN SAGE AND TREVOR EICHORN IN WHOOPEE! AT THE SHEDD

Lively choreography by Caitlin Christopher and Jean Nelson brings out the best in this talented ensemble. One to watch is Rafael Batya, who at 13 is one of the strongest movers onstage, holding his own against dancers twice his age.

The one challenge of the 1928 script is the work with indigenous peoples. Set in and around the pueblos of Arizona, First Nations folks play a vital role. Fair warning: You may wince to hear the term "red man" bandied about, but that was the time. There have apparently been a few

tweaks to the original script but, overall, the native peoples here are presented as infinitely more educated and intelligent than any of the European-American interlopers.

This is not highbrow stuff. It's the kind of vaudeville-inspired show that sets up a whole transitional scene solely for the dumb punch line. I won't give any of them away but, believe me, they're groaners all, and hilarious. — *Rachael Carnes*

*Whoopie!* plays 7:30pm Friday and Saturday, Aug. 7-8, and 2pm Sunday, Aug. 9, at The Shedd; \$20-\$36, tickets at 434-7000 or [theshedd.org](http://theshedd.org).