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XANADU (Mazeppa Productions): A campy, aMUSEing musical

July 16, 2014 - Kathryn Osenlund



Clio (Erica Nicole Rothman, center) with her sister Muses in Mazeppa Productions' XANADU (Photo credit: Kelly Anne Pipe Photography)

Zeus has decreed that Muses from Mount Olympus are not allowed to fall in love with mortals—that includes the Muse Clio and a boy from Venice Beach. Therein lies a story of forbidden love, gumption, and sly swipes at certain Hollywood movies—especially XANADU (Universal Pictures, 1980).

Sonny (C.J. Celeiro) is a Venice Beach sidewalk artist with lofty ambitions for a pretty clueless guy: He wants to find a venue for creating and sharing art. Oh, and he wants to open a roller disco. He falls in love with a roller skating dream girl, Kira (Erica Nicole Rothman) who's secretly the Muse Clio. References to Greek gods or Mount Olympus fly right past Sonny, but he's loveable, he's game, and he's determined to get the job done and get the girl. Kira, for her part will stand up to the powers that be, and on Mount Olympus the powers are pretty powerful.

The audience is seated in narrow rows along each side of a corridor that runs from the proscenium arch in the front of the room to the façade of the abandoned Xanadu theater in the back. The front stage, charmingly decorated with seashells and little waves that represent Venice Beach, houses the musicians (Ryan Touhey [Musical director], Kanako Omae, Alex Dragonetti). The performance area also includes risers that run above and behind the audience on each side, so while the actors can be seen across the way, it would require a 180 degree swivel neck to see the actors behind you.

XANADU revels in being lame, hysterical and

heartwarming at the same time. Two of the lovely Muse sisters are in drag (Nate Golden, Adam Hoyak). Two Muses (Kimberly Maxon, Sarah Spangenberg) join Kira to complete a retro Andrews Sisters-esque trio. Outstanding over-the-top villains played by Angela Leone—the Muse who can really belt it out, and Dylan Geringer—the comical evil sidekick Muse, keep things rollicking.

And then there's the wig: In a breezy voguish touch, two electric fans are brought in to blow on leading lady Kira, so her hair will look cool blowing back as she sings. But it only adds to the cominess as the tresses of her frankly fake blonde wig just sit there and don't budge.

In a dramatically lighted and memorable scene right out of a movie set, Danny Maguire (suave Paul Weagraff), a tough businessman, watches from the 1980s as his young self (Nate Golden) dances and romances his Muse with a remarkable tap performance back in the 1940s.

The overall set/lighting design is bright and colorful. The elongated space, however, has its pluses and minuses. A big plus is that the runway makes the action wonderfully accessible to the audience, and it's great for roller skating. But at the same time, the stretched out performance area makes it harder to watch and focus, and it weakens the lighting in some areas. The show's timing is affected too. But the biggest minus is that the physical arrangement thins out the sound. The space that's great for skating is less effective for acoustics. The band can be heard easily, but the individually miked singers are all over the place. Their dialogue and lyrics can be harder to understand than they should be, and at times their harmony separates out into less pleasing individual parts.

From the get-go it's frustratingly hard to hear and understand Kira, who is lovely and cute just like the show's spiritual guide, Olivia Newton John. Like Olivia, her voice makes up in sweetness what it lacks in power. But sweet doesn't carry well in sound waves. Complicate that with the space issue and her funny fake Australian accent, and often it's a strain to make out what she's saying.

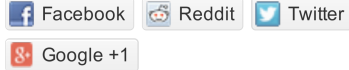
But happily, this Mazeppa Production's big pluses outweigh the minuses. The design concepts, lively direction, entertaining choreography, sparkly and amusing costumes, and most especially, the youthful exuberance of the cast make this a fun campy choice for an entertaining summertime show.

Back in '07 in New York, during the busy interim after *Xanadu's* workshop production and before previews began on Broadway, I met the show's witty and likeable playwright, Douglas Carter Beane, at a critics lunch. Although in the script he relentlessly sends up his own work along with Universal's 1980 flop (and later cult fave), *XANADU*, he clearly had a warm, though not un-ironic fondness for his musical. Whenever he said the word, "Xanadu," he'd cross his forearms in an X over his heart. [Christ Church Neighborhood House, 20 North American Street] **July 9-26, 2014,**

<http://mazeppa.org/xanadu/>.

For another perspective, see Deb Miller's review [here](#).

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About the author

[Kathryn Osenlund](#)

Kathryn Osenlund, theater and film junkie, is a former National Critics Institute fellow, NEA fellow in Arts Journalism, and member of the American Theater Critics Assn Steinberg and Osborn playwriting awards committee. A Barrymore Award nominator and professor emeritus in communications and theater, Kathryn also writes for NY-based [CurtainUp.com](#). On twitter [@theatrendorphin](#).

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Fractured. Awry. Akilter. There is frighteningly little cohesion and order (or shall we call it normalcy?) in the dark visual and kinesthetic world that Katherine Kiefer Stark presents in *Falling into Here or The Importance of Normal*.

The performance is a welcome dance work among the talking heads presentations of the 12th annual First Person Arts Festival, a 10-day affair dedicated mostly to autobiographical narrative expressed through storytelling and song.

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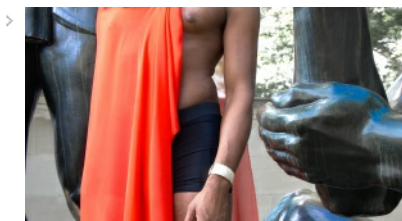
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