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## Xanadu — Mazeppa Productions at Christ Church Neighborhood House

“Xanadu” is a musical that makes fun of itself and the 1980 movie on which it is based.

Douglas Carter Beane’s tongue was so far embedded in his cheek when he wrote the script for the show, I bet he could lick the back of his eardrum.

Rob Henry, with the incalculable help of choreographer Robert Harris, directs an exuberantly lively and spirited production of Beane’s work, with songs by Jeff Lynne and John Farrar, for Mazeppa Productions, but one dilemma lingers. As enthusiastic as a “Xanadu” cast can be, and Henry’s is having a ball, and no matter how much Beane lampoons the silliness of “Xanadu’s” story and structure, no one can hide the horrible truth that the basic material, the 1980 screenplay by Richard Christian Danus and Marc Reid Rubel, is a badly conceived bore.



No parody, even one as cleverly, and blatantly, self-effacing as Beane’s, which points out every inconsistency and risible plot twist, can cover that “Xanadu” is too awful even to mock. Jokes and rolled eyes may abound. Beane can make fun of an ’80s surfer dude’s ignorance. Muses can be as jealous, spiteful, and mischievous as anyone. An Australian accent can be marked as an absurd affectation. But, as with Gertrude Stein’s Oakland, there’s no “there” there.

Beane works hard. Some of the Mazeppa actors, Dylan Gerringer in particular, milk every nuance to exploit whatever comedy they can find. C.J. Celeiro acts a stunningly dense Sonny Malone, the surfer dune. Angela Leone fills the theater with her voice and entertains it with her sarcasm. Beane even gives Leone and Gerringer a bit in which they are so hammy, they literally chew the scenery (a gambit, I’m sure, inserted in the original Broadway production by director Christopher Ashley to eke an inside joke about Mary Testa and Jackie Hoffman, two character players known for their large performances).

All of the gags and quips and self-deprecating references entertain, as does most of Leone’s bombast, but the story and plot of “Xanadu,” even considering Beane’s interpolations from another early ’80s howler, “Clash of the Titans,” have too little propulsion and thrust for the vehicle to consistently fly.

Enter Robert Harris. Just when you think Mazeppa’s “Xanadu” is going to be conquered by a script too inadequate to benefit from satire, songs too lame to be anything but late bar-table nostalgia — ELO’s “Evil Woman” excepted — and staging that is cute but difficult to focus on and absorb given Henry’s oblong arrangement of the stage and seating, dancing begins and changes the game by accelerating the pace and providing something entertaining to watch.

Numbers may remain hard to follow in the long, narrow Christ Church space, but they have such power and energy, they win you over. Even if you never quite like “Xanadu,” you know that all hope for a good time is far from lost.

Every cast member is bright-eyed and versatile. Whether Harris has his troupe moving in a marchlike step and standard formation, or he has them do through the disco moves popular in the ’80s, or he has them hoofing as if their lives depended on it, he has the ability to turn Mazeppa’s “Xanadu” from a sweet and well-intended bore into an extravaganza of show biz wit and youthful sparkle.

### Information

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You fall in love with the Mazeppa cast when they dance. They look so happy and have such joy in their eyes. In one of “Xanadu’s” best sequences, a flashback number that sets Erica Nicole Rothman, Kimberley Maxson, and Sarah Spangenberg in well-executed, tight, ’40s girl singer harmony, front and center on the closest thing Brian Seaman’s set has to a proscenium, Nate Golden suddenly appears from the opposite end of the house to do a grand and lively tap dance that changes the mood in Christ Church from lulling to soaring.

You want Golden to go on all night with his clicking and clacking and suave style. “This,” you say to yourself, “is a show!”

Golden’s dancing, and the trio’s singing, are straightforward. They pay tribute to the sounds and styles of another era instead of parodying them. Elemental entertainment always works. The day, and Henry’s production, is temporarily saved.

It has also made a new impression. This cast has the goods, and the show gives them opportunity to display them. You relax more through the trite, if comical, denigration because you know a dance number is coming or that Dylan Gerringer, a tad broadly and self-consciously, is going to treat you to some facial expression or “oh, brother” look that shows moxie and disdain even when it’s overdone.

Gerringer also has a low singing voice that stands out among the ensemble in production numbers.

Mazeppa’s “Xanadu” becomes a mixed bag, deadly one moment when dialogue is being spoken, particularly in scenes that don’t include jokes or satire, and rollickingly sensational the next when the cast is on its toes, or its roller skates, and going through one of Harris’s feverishly non-stop numbers.

The promise of the second gets you through the first, but sledding can be tough.

Paul Weagraff, Celeiro, and Rothman all do well as the three characters who matter most to Beane’s story, one that makes you think of “Heaven Can Wait” as much as the film “Xanadu,” but when they get deep into exposition, the musical and the production get mired. There’s nothing that sustains the energy, the life force, the ensemble musters when it takes to dance, on and off of roller skates. Scenes involving Weagraff’s character, Danny Maguire, can be especially stodgy and skippable.

The best advice is to be prepared to let “Xanadu” grow on you a little, or at least sporadically knock you for a loop in dance sequences, and bide your time through the irredeemably dull passages to get to the parts that entertain, parts that almost always involve dancing and that make special use of Golden and Adam Hoyak as the males among the muses.

“Xanadu” is about Muses, the actual Greek muses of music, comedy, dance, etc., coming to Earth from Mount Olympus, home of their father, Zeus, to help a human realize an artistic dream. The nine Muses, economically reduced to seven in “Xanadu,” are drawn to Venice Beach, California where a chalk artist, Sonny Malone, frequently includes them in his street drawings.

Sonny spends his time decorating Venice pavements, but his ambition is to take an abandoned theater, the Xanadu, and restore it as a roller disco.

Hearing this, one of the Muses, Clio chooses Sonny as the person she will next inspire.

Zeus has set down strict rules about the way his daughters, including the two played by men, must behave when dealing with mortals. Firmest of all the dicta is one that demands no Muse will fall in love with a creature, particularly a human, with no Olympian pedigree.

Clio needs to find a way to attract Sonny, so she devises a disguise, a ruse that will turn her from a demi-goddess to good old American girl.

Except Beane, in a salvo that comments on Olivia Newton-John’s portrayal of Clio in the ’80 movie, has her decide to be Australian and call herself Kira.

As Kira goes about befriending Sonny by approaching his latest pavement drawing wearing roller skates, red leg warmers, and one of the worst wigs I’ve ever seen, two of

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her sisters, Melpomene (the Muse of tragedy) and Calliope (the Muse of poetry) determine to sabotage her standing with Zeus by alternately urging and warning against Kira's romantic feelings towards Sonny.

The owner of the Xanadu property is another obstacle. He considers the building an eyesore and has it scheduled for demolition. He built the structure as a theater meant to showcase big bands with attractive girl singers, but his relationship with a singer went awry before he could open the showplace. World War II also intervened, and the mogul, Danny Maguire, lost interest in the property. As "Xanadu" begins, the theater provokes bad memories, and Danny believes he and Venice Beach will be best served by relegating the white elephant to the wrecking ball.

Maguire is closed to Sonny's entreaties to sell him the theater, heaven knows with what money. He is more sympathetic to Kira, who reminds him of a woman named Kitty from his past, a muse of a kind for whom he wanted to build Xanadu. The great '40s production number and tap dance is a reflection of Danny's memories of and affection for Kitty.

You can see how hackneyed and unexciting the premise is.

Douglas Carter Beane certainly did. He has Kira, Melpomene, Calliope, other Muses, and even Sonny making snide comments about how stupid something they want or are doing is. The entire show is filled with digs at its plots and limited idea.

A variety show is the main salvation. Rob Henry and Robert Harris provide one, and that, at least, keeps the Christ Church theater jumping on a regular enough basis.

The songs for "Xanadu" come from the compositions of Jeff Lynne and John Farrar, a team that did not work together until "Xanadu."

Their songs are perfect, if unexceptional, examples of '80s pop. A few of them went high on pop charts, much higher than "Xanadu's" receipts went on box office lists. The title song and "Magic" did exceedingly well. Lynne and Farrar also had the smarts to pepper "Xanadu's" score with work they wrote separately for other purposes. Chief among the songs added to "Xanadu" is the Electronic Light Orchestra's "Evil Woman," written by Lynne, and another ELO favorite, "Strange Magic." Farrar's main solo contribution is a hit he wrote for Olivia Newton-John, "Have You Never Been Mellow."

Eighties music aficionados may overlook the weakness of "Xanadu's" story line just to hear familiar hits of which they might be fond and for which they might be nostalgic. Lynne and Farrar's score is, in general, serviceable at best. In Mazeppa's case, it provides good background for Robert Harris to be creative and use Seaman's runway of a set to vibrant purpose.

One can see how Erica Nicole Rothman's Kira can fall hard for C.J. Celeiro's Sonny. Celeiro comes across as a loveable lunk who may not know what a Muse is, and may miss every classical reference, in addition to some contemporary allusions, but is sincere about wanting to have a roller disco and is direct in the way he expresses his romantic leanings to Kira.

Celeiro is a master of playing Sonny's dimness. He has the modern young person's way to being unapologetically indifferent to, and even amused by, ignorance to a science. Sonny can shrug off any slight or laugh away anything he doesn't understand. He is determined to achieve what he wants and will work hard for it. A challenge Danny makes, and Sonny accepts, speaks to Sonny's diligence when something he deems important is concerned.

Sonny, of course, knows nothing about business or what it might take to keep Xanadu afloat. He is unencumbered by practical considerations. In an '80s California way, especially associated with Venice Beach, he wants everything to be easy and smooth without having to lift a finger to make it so.

Unless that finger is used to make his dream for Xanadu come true. Sonny's lackadaisical laziness fades when sprucing up the abandoned theater is concerned. Sonny may not have many facets, but Celeiro displays all that arise. The actor has a graceful nonchalance about him.

Celeiro is not always as graceful on roller skates. He is the one actor on the Mazeppa

stage whose safety and balance I feared for. Rothman saved him from falls at least twice.

Rothman can skate. She is a regular Muse on wheels and seems to enjoy having ball bearings attached to her feet.

Rothman looks as if she's having a good time as Kira. She certainly has the character and show's sense of self-deprecation down pat.

Paul Weagraff's part as the resolute, then sentimental, Danny is relatively thankless. He doesn't get to join into the camp, costumed fun until he has the chance to play Zeus late in the musical.

Weagraff approaches his part with sincerity and persuades that he is a tough business with no compunctions about demolishing Xanadu and little sympathy for Sonny's wishes, most of which he regards as daft.

Dylan Gerringer is a hoot to watch as Calliope. She certainly put her sarcastic expressions forward whenever given the opportunity, which is through most of the show.

Gerringer is self-conscious and a little ostentatious with her antics, but large scale is in keeping with her character, one of the Muses that plots against Kira and wants to see her banished from Olympus.

Gerringer and Angela Leone as Melpomene are called upon to be comic villains of "Xanadu," and they take to their task with relish.

Melpomene and Calliope are the entertainers. They are given leeway to be as big and bombastic as they like, and they take enjoyable advantage of their freedom.

Leone uses her size and a big voice to add to her natural dominating presence. I liked the truculence she gives Melpomene and her way of making Beane's satirical elements pay.

Adam Hoyak kept standing out in dance numbers. He has a natural stride and a good sense of rhythm that is suited to the dances Harris devised for the awkward space on which Mazeppa plays its "Xanadu."

It was particularly amusing when Hoyak, dressed as a centaur, does a dance step as if he had a horse's leg, as the centaur does.

Nate Golden also brings brightness to the stage. The sparkle in his eyes shows what a good time he is having in this show.

Sarah Spangenberg is particularly good on roller skates and did a wonderful job leading a train of dancers through their paces in a finale that puts the entire cast on wheels.

Rob Henry set Brian Seaman a mighty challenge. The "Xanadu" set has to be open between a proscenium at one end of the stage and a large set piece that is the front of the Xanadu theater on the other.

He meets that challenge by keeping things colorful where he can. The transformation of the decrepit Xanadu for the restored one is especially good.

Julia Poiesz designed a Pegasus and centaur in the midst of some flowing, and some form-fitting Muse outfits. She did a good job picking out the beach togs for Sonny. I don't know whether Poiesz chose the wig for Rothman's Kira, but it was one big miscue as the hairpiece looked totally unnatural and did not style well.

"Xanadu," produced by Mazeppa Productions, runs through Saturday, July 26 on the fourth floor of Christ Church Neighborhood House, behind the historical house of worship at N. American and Church Streets, in Philadelphia. (Head to the glass doors towards Church Street or towards the Arden.) Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday (with a 7:30 p.m. show on Monday, July 21) and 3 p.m. Sunday, July 13. Tickets are \$25 and can be obtained by calling 267-559-9602 or by going online to <http://www.mazeppa.org>.

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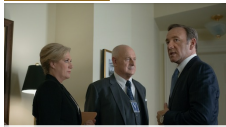
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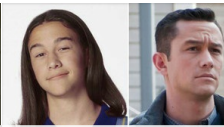
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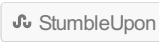
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