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BWW Reviews: Murray Mednick's Latest Bows at the Lounge Theatre

by Don Grigware

The Fool and the Red Queen



written by Murray Mednick
directed by Mednick and Guy Zimmerman
The Lounge Theatre
through June 24

After years of popularity with innovative 'realism-plus' theatre, Murray Mednick's work stands tall, and surprisingly this is my first taste of a Mednick play. I hope it's not my last! My first being *The Fool and the Red Queen*, now receiving its world premiere production at the Lounge Theatre in Hollywood. With fine direction by Mednick and Guy Zimmerman and a noteworthy cast, the play is an intriguingly magical odyssey that may not suit everyone's tastebuds, but which will certainly compel, entertain, and maybe even enlighten.

With Mednick, it's not plot or action but *language*. The beauty of his play comes through his poetry, as it's written in iambic verse. This is not obvious to the listener, but somehow without realizing it, you get caught up in its rhythms to such a degree -even though you may be a bit confused about content - that you are completely and irresistibly pulled in.

The first act of *Fool* centers on a bizarre audition callback for actor Gary Bean (John Diehl), a character who has been in, including this, seven of Mednick's plays entitled *The Gary Plays*. Bean's son had been killed suspiciously in a drug deal, and, for his own sense of well-being, Gary is trying to make sense of the premature death. The producers of a movie entitled *The Fool and the Red Queen* (Jack Kehler and Gray Palmer) monitor the screen test audition of Gary for the character Rikki a soldier, who is, when we see him, almost comatose from so much killing. As such for Gary Bean's character, *Fool* is a play within a play. In the second act, begun at the end of Act I by the Red Queen (Julia Prud'homme) calling for her Fool (Bill Celentano), we are transported to a medieval time and fictitious place where the ranting Queen berates and victimizes her Fool, kind of like Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* What we witness could be a marriage - it certainly has its seductively sensual moments - or it could be any boss blaming a plan gone awry on his (her) employee. The Queen is ultimately brought down and distraught over her subjects' reactions to her waging a devastating war. What we get in the long run is quite bleak: war cannot be contained and everyone will die, one way or another. It's inevitable. From Becket's *Waiting for Godot* to Jerry Seinfeld's sitcom where he excuses the plot as representing *nothing*, from past to present time, the theme is meaninglessness. Supremacy and inferiority do not actually exist.

The acting in *Fool* is first rate with special nods to Peggy A. Blow as Chorus/Innkeeper, whose depth of understanding and wisdom and beautiful vocal intonations make us perk up our ears at her every syllable. Prud'homme makes a perfectly monstrous, bitchy woman going through PMS - yet, she is completely fun and playful - and Celentano is delightfully droll and dextrous as Fool. Diehl plays Bean and Rikki as depressed beyond measure and Kehler and Palmer are quite amusing as the producers who have their way with their actors in putting together a piece with the intent of which they haven't the least comprehension. Set design by Jeffrey Atherton is vibrantly colorful as are costumes for Act II by Ann Closs-Farley and lighting design by Matt Richter is superior. Fascinating pace and staging from Mednick and Zimmerman! With an inexplicable change of tone from one part to another and even within a scene containing such diverse highs and lows, it is easy to understand Mednick's early experience in vaudeville with its zany comedic twists and turns.

When all is said and done *The Fool and the Red Queen* provides a deliriously intelligent and riveting evening of theatre ... for those who want their theatre edgy and distinctly left of center.