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October 20, 2004

DES MOINES

Rush to see Limbaugh

Quick, quirky show sure to please fans of satire and farce

By Carolyn Szczepanski

It's the kind of non-stop, slapstick, nothing-sacred show that leaves the narrator short of breath and red in the face.

Like the man it lampoons, Rush Limbaugh in *Night School* is loud, obnoxious and grossly exaggerated. But don't let that deter you. An equal opportunity satire, the play parodies everyone from Spalding Gray to Garrison Keilor, in a farce that moves so fast each scene outdoes the last.

As the narrator so (over)dramatically decrees at the start of the TV documentary, the play follows the demise of the rotund Republican talk show host. When the rise of another radio personality — J. Neil Rodriguez — threatens Rush's reign as the most listened-to man on the airwaves, his manager ships him off to an experimental community college to beat the Hispanic pundit at his own game by learning Spanish. But the plan lets loose a series of ill-fated events when the right-winger falls for fellow student Nina Eggly, whose past is so left of center she's on an FBI watch list.

To pursue his love interest Limbaugh must hide his real identity, which becomes riotously problematic when Eggly starts listening to the radio and Rush takes a role in a public performance of *Othello*. And much like a Shakespeare play, Rush Limbaugh in *Night School* descends into an endless string of mistaken identities, fated coincidences and exaggerated soliloquies that is sure to satisfy theatre buffs who like

witty social commentary and average Joes looking for a dose of Saturday Night Live type comedy.

As Rush Limbaugh, Thatcher Williams is a bumbling buffoon, who, as the play progresses finds himself in increasing levels of emotional disarray and physical undress. Also the producer, Williams captures Limbaugh's sickeningly self-congratulatory attitude, forced chuckles and punctuated speech. Michael Cornelison also hits the mark with his professorial narration that chides the cast and leers at the on-stage action. But there is one weak link among the three main characters. Despite a hippie-inspired skirt, Karen Burkett-Sandoval fails to infuse Nina Eggly's character with any of the screaming clichés that could be attached to a feminist and former member of the Weather Underground.

But it's not the big three that carry the show, anyway. The four animated members of the supporting cast, in their whirlwind of character changes, energize the performance, expertly reviving the audience when Limbaugh's stuttering becomes too much or Eggly's borderline blandness bogs down the scene. Sporting a blue Mohawk, Kyle Chizek plays a bevy of hilariously overdone characters, from Rush's bulging-eyed, cigar-wielding manager to the flamboyantly gay artist Homo Ludens. Barbara Martin, a church music director by day, also succeeded in her cast of caricatures,

including a hopelessly tangential Spalding Gray and a pompous professor who encourages her students to "Touch your genitals." With her perfect portrayal of the rigid and respiratory Garrison Keilor and expertly accented BBC news anchor, Kate Van Haften keeps the audience on its toes, too.

But the crowning member of the cast is undoubtedly Timothy Larson. It's well worth the price of the ticket just to see him strut the stage as Alvin Volt, a pretentious professor who slurs "r's into "w's during one of the play's most memorable moments: a lengthy pontification on the life cycle of the pear and how it relates to our sacrament-deprived culture of dissociation. Sounds dry, but, trust us, it's hilarious. Then, when he takes on J. Neil "Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrodriguez," the manic Hispanic radio host hot on Limbaugh's rating heels, Larson inspires thoughts of seeing the play a second time.

With the chaos building as the performance progresses, the show comes to a climax with a dramatic play within a play that brings the entire cast to the stage, scrambling and shouting as the myriad identities come crashing together. And like the rest of Rush Limbaugh in *Night School*, the timing and talent are just enough to make it a perfectly delightful disaster.

Rush will grace the stage of the Vaudeville Mews at 7 p.m. Oct. 20-23, and Oct. 24 at 4 p.m. Tickets are \$15. Info: 243-3270