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"Corleone" is good. Capisce?

REGISTER THEATER CRITIC

In "Corleone," a Shakespearean retelling of "The Godfather" at Grand View College through Sunday, the ill-fated horse meets a much more flowery demise:

"Tom left a final message on this cue / Half-million-dollar horses make fine glue."

The audience doesn't actually see the poor beast's severed head, but we get the idea. And the same goes for the rest of the show: We don't see it all, but we get the idea.

As it turns out, "The Godfather," the classic 1972 movie about the aging patriarch of a New York mafia dynasty, lends itself well to the Shakespearean adaptation. With its power struggles and tangled subplots, it falls right in line with "Richard III," "Julius Caesar," and "King Lear."

"It was almost as if ('Godfather' creator) Mario Puzo was imitating Shakespeare when he wrote the first one," said David Mann, the Minneapolis-based playwright who wrote "Corleone."

During a question-and-answer session after Saturday night's performance, Mann explained that his play emerged as an experiment during the Minnesota Fringe Festival several years ago.

As Mann tells it, five theater troupes — including a dance group, a comedy improv team and Mann's own Shakespearean company — sliced up the story of "The Godfather" into fifths and each performed a part according to the troupe's style.

When Mann learned about his role in the project, he had some doubts.

"What do you mean — write it like Shakespeare? Yeah, right," he said.

But Mann, who studied acting at the London School of Art and Music and has tackled roles like Hamlet and Pericles, took on the assignment and eventually wrote the rest of the story around his original fifth.

The resulting script is packed with sly references to the Bard's work, including the opening monologue in "Romeo and Juliet":

"Five households, all alike in dignity / In New York City where we lay our scene / New burn old flames of Sic'ly's enmity / And keep Law's gaze from scouring hands unclean."

But despite the clever script, the 80-minute "Corleone" feels rushed compared to the three-hour movie, and the thugs lose some of their menace when they start spewing iambic pentameter.

In the swirl of subplots — nine actors play about 40 roles — there isn't much time to flesh out any of the characters, but a few make the most of their quick turn in the spotlight.

John Butz shines as the imperious Don Vito Corleone and later as a geriatric priest with a spot-on Italian accent. Bob Baskerville croons like Sinatra as lounge singer Johnny Fontane ("Well sigh no more / This smile's for / The bonny, blithe young Connie"), and Etta Berkowitz packs a punch both as the don's conniving, drug-dealing rival and as a sequin-spangled Vegas madame.

"Corleone," produced by Theater . . . For a Change, retells only the first part of "The Godfather" trilogy, but there's more than enough plot for a single evening.

And as the opening scene promises:

"Within this hour we'll see who lives to rule / And learn that youngest sons can be most cruel."

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WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Grand View College's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St., Des Moines

TICKETS: \$10 at the door or www.iowatix.com