



Monty Python meets Dr. Who – something new this way comes

A theatre review by John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

Des Moines, Iowa Theater ... for a CHANGE (TFAC) launches into another season of niche-filling delight ... or, should I say, a half season. This company has quickly established itself in the Greater Des Moines performing arts landscape by pushing limits, and making theatre accessible to the general public with low ticket prices and fulfilling fare. In their fourth year, in order to align their full season with the calendar year, they present a “half season” of two shows, their current *The Amazing Adventures of Nigel & Bridgette*, and the December production of *Jacob Marley’s Christmas Carol*.

Leave it to TFAC to produce category-defying comedy unlike anything Des Moines has previously seen. *The Amazing Adventures of Nigel & Bridgette* wanders into realms previously unexplored in the Greater Des Moines creative landscape. This is multi-media, wacky, original entertainment, patterned after British sit-coms, with a heavily skewed science fiction influence. Conceived during a Comedy Xperiment improvisation routine, John Cisar (Nigel) and Susan Gulbranson (Bridgette) nurtured their comedic characters into full-fledged life. Now a series of three shows – or, to be more accurate, adventures – with a strong penchant for the absurd, they added next door neighbors, Simon and Sara Jones (Eric Bench and Jolene Rice), to complete the necessary ensemble for the merry mayhem contained in the adventures. Who cares if the British accents aren’t spot on? This is a parody of British sit-com, after all. This quirky quartet works wonderfully well together, and their infectious joy of ensemble work quickly envelopes the audience.

The advance promotional efforts for *The Amazing Adventures of Nigel & Bridgette* are very worthy of mention. Advance chatter started on their MySpace site (www.myspace.com/nigelbridgette), which has quickly garnered a gathering of gregarious entertainment-entrepreneurs. DVDs were scattered throughout the community – on park benches, in restaurants, on gas pumps – to be discovered and taken home and viewed. The anchor of the DVD is a mockumentary, *Inside the Actor’s Flat*, narrated by the James Lipton-like host, Harold A. Campbell, played with affable conviction by Joe Gentzler. Although Gentzler doesn’t appear on stage, his pre-show appearance during a screening of *Inside the Actor’s Flat* along with the alter-egos of the actors portraying their sit-com characters “off camera” lends another layer of creativity for the evening’s fun.

Andrew Zumwalt earns very special acknowledgement with his video work for the DVD, the pre-show, the show credits and other film-related support for this project. A time travel sequence is great fun, as is a clever use of “play-within-a-play” footage. Both are testaments to quick work on Zumwalt’s part. Arizona Ink Studios, has been creating short films for 12 years, and is planning its first feature in 2009.

The scenic design works nicely, too, however, no Scenic Designer is credited in the playbill. I imagine it’s a collaborative effort between John Cisar, Thatcher Williams (TFAC), Sean Kearney (also Lighting Designer), David Williams, and others. So, a general “Chip Up!” for a job well done goes to all who helped.

In an attempt to best evaluate the effectiveness of this novel format, a quick online search gleaned a formula for analyzing the success of a British sit-com. It is: $C = (((R \times D) + V) \times F) + S \div A$. Here is the breakdown. According to Dr. Helen Pilcher, a molecular neurologist and stand-up comedian, the success (C) is determined by multiplying the recognizability of the main character (R) by their delusions of grandeur (D). This is added to the verbal wit of the script (V) and the total is multiplied by the amount someone falls over or suffers an injury (F). The difference in status between the highest and lowest characters is added (S) and the total is divided by the success of the show’s scheme (A).

How does *The Amazing Adventures of Nigel & Bridgette* rate against a British sit-com such as *The Office*, which achieved a 656 rating, versus some real turkeys, which rated single digits? *Nigel & Bridgette* seems to hold its own when calculating their success (C). Nigel and Bridgette have a strong recognizability factor, although there is some fluctuation in their delusions of grandeur. Simon and Sara do compensate in the delusions category. The script rates well for verbal wit, with enough fun repartee, with only occasional lulls in pacing. While the number of falls isn’t high, there seem to be enough mental trips to rate the sit-com nicely. The difference between the highest and lowest of the characters is large enough, and each show’s scheme does quite well. Now, set the calculators and pencils down, and simply savor a quirky, clever offering grown locally but thinking globally.

The tongue-in-cheek romp that *Nigel & Bridgette* delivers is fun, meandering through the witty, parody, geeky, sophomoric, and outlandish, with enough unexpected twists and punch lines to satisfy all – except, perhaps, the most condescending of prigs. Then again, this show isn’t for prigs. It’s for those who enjoy clever, line-crossing multi-media performance guaranteed to tickle the funny bone.

Nigel & Bridgette earns its spot during this busy time of the performing arts year when everyone and their brother is producing a show. It’s not for everyone, perhaps...but, who wants to be for everyone? Not I, old chap!