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Sci-fi geekfest has jokes that stick

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The term "geekfest" might be the best way to describe "The (Continuing) Adventures of Nigel and Bridgette," which Theater for a Change presents through Sunday at Grand View University's Viking Theatre. The British-style sci-fi comedy unapologetically revels in, among other things: "Star Trek," "Star Wars," Latin verb conjugation, Ouija boards, puns, pirates and something called a phase-shifting interferometer.

So audiences who enjoy those things may also enjoy the show. Audiences who don't, well, maybe not so much.

The 2½-hour program is built around a few loosely connected episodes, which extend Nigel and Bridgette's adventures from TFAC's show last season. The British couple originally emerged from a comedy improv sketch by the local group Comedy Xperiment, and this longer, scripted show by John Cisar retains some of that same anything-goes wackiness.

In the first episode, Elvis shows up on the other side of an "alternate dimensional vortex." In the second, Bill Gates develops a race of robots. "I keep trying to polarize their neural synapses," he cries, "but it's happening too fast!"

Unfortunately, the show also retains some of comedy improv's self-indulgence, and there are moments when the cast seems to enjoy themselves more than the people they're trying to entertain. The sex-crazed pirates, for example, aren't as outrageous as their creators probably intended, and their smirking innuendos would prompt genuine laughter only among those who haven't already passed through middle school.

Still, Nigel and Bridgette's earlier performances attracted a small loyal following of fans, and their "continuing adventures" will likely attract a few more. This time around, guest director Ann Wilkinson guides the same actors through the roles they played before: Cisar as imaginative Nigel; Susan Gulbranson as his practical wife, Bridgette; Eric Bench as their neighbor Simon; and Jolene Rice as his wife, Sara.

Both couples work well together, and their easygoing rapport helps keep the show grounded. They act like human beings even when they share the stage with various creatures who are not.

Jason Rainwater makes a fine ghost Elvis, in the afterworld's droopiest sequined jumpsuit; Joe Gentzler ably fills various supporting roles, including a turn as a mysterious guard lurking in the basement of the London Public Library; and David Oddy swaggers as Captain Jean-Luc Picard's long-lost twin.

The show benefits from Cory Hug's explosive and often smoky special effects, as well as Andrew Zumwalt's slickly produced videos, which are projected onto a screen above the stage. The computer-animated sequence he created for each episode's opening credits is impressive.

Seen as a whole, the homegrown show is a boisterous demonstration of creativity, which lobs enough jokes that at least a few of them stick.

One of the best — and most telling — gags arrives when the lights come up in the London library, where a poster riffs on the current ad campaign for libraries on this side of the Atlantic. It shows a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II in full regalia, with the simple caption: "I geek corgis."
