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Entertainment Lifestyle

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Theater review: Cheer for the bad guy 'For the Greater Good'

Sam Hurwitt IJ correspondent

While they're usually described as musical comedies or political satires — both of which are true — the shows that the San Francisco Mime Troupe tours through Bay Area parks every summer are also melodramas. In one show after another, downtrodden workers let their voracious capitalist exploiters know that they refuse to play a rigged game anymore. As the 53-year-old collective's current slogan is "overthrowing capitalism, one musical at a time," the message has to be that

radical change is possible, so the leering fat-cat villains are foiled, at least for today. Written and directed by troupe head

writer Michael Gene Sullivan, this year's "For the Greater Good, or The Last Election" cleverly turns that formula on its head. This time the hero is an investment banker who gambles his clients' money away without their knowledge — sacrificing people's livelihoods for the "greater good" of the free market. Far from concealing the play's melodramatic nature, the troupe plays it up to the hilt as a way of mocking the right-wing rhetoric that what's good for the richest Americans is good for everyone else. The basic plot and most of the characters are lifted from an actual melodrama, Dion Boucicault's 1857 play "The Poor of New York," only with its mustache-twirling villains turned to self-styled heroes of the economy.

In both plays, banker Gideon Bloodgood is about to suffer utter ruin, having lost all his investors' money on risky investments, when Captain Fairweather wanders in to invest his family's considerable nest egg. Bloodgood plans to use the money to save himself and pay off his clerk Badger, who's blackmailing him. The captain returns with the intent of investing the money elsewhere but suddenly suffers a fatal heart attack, so his widow and daughter go hungry on the streets while Bloodgood and the venal Badger live high on the hog.

The main new character is villain Damian Landless, an Occupy camp organizer with fiendish schemes of ending income inequality and stirring up revolution. Reggie D. White attacks the role with relish, crouching and whirling his black cape (a hoodie extended to vampire-cloak length by costumer Blake More). Landless is an unemployed drama teacher, so dramatic flourishes are to be expected. Sullivan highlights the bizarre topsy-turvydom of the story, in which up is down and

wrong is right, by making the obvious scoundrel Badger the narrator, played by Victor Toman as a hilariously shameless freeloader. As played by longtime trouper Ed Holmes, Bloodgood retains the smarmy double-talk of a typical SFMT bad guy, but now it's combined with the Shatneresque pomp of a noble hero.

Velina Brown is a poised model soldier as Captain Fairweather, who's spent a lifetime defending the free market wherever U.S. forces weren't supposed to be. His florid concerns for his family's welfare are punctuated by hilariously frequent heart attacks that keep Bloodgood guessing whether he's dead yet. Brown also plays his daughter Lucy, an idealistic soldier freshly returned from Afghanistan, whose family's desperate poverty hasn't shaken her faith in capitalism one iota.

Keiko Shimosato Carreiro is her chirpy mother Mrs. Fairweather, a perfect houseless housewife, who bravely soldiers on baking cookies at the Occupy camp. Lisa Hori-Garcia is amusingly airheaded as Gideon's pampered daughter Alida, a giddy wannabe revolutionary with Francophile affectations.

Hori-Garcia and Toman are also adorable as the elderly couple Mr. and Mrs. Puffy, who joined the Occupy camp because their home was foreclosed upon but don't know what to make of all this revolutionary rhetoric. That said, their roles are underdeveloped and don't really affect the plot. They simply embody gullible working-class people who swallow Republican talking points against their own best interests. When Mr. Puffy sneaks into their old home to watch Fox

News, Mrs. Puffy gasps, "Don't let Mr. Landless hear you; he'll kick you out of the masses!"

For an election-year play subtitled "The Last Election," the show doesn't really have anything to do with electoral politics. Bloodgood recruits Lucy for a seat in Congress that he's essentially already bought, while Alida becomes the poster child for the Occupy movement, but not much comes of either of those subplots.

The songs by musical director Pat Moran aren't particularly memorable, but there are some standout numbers such as Damian's upbeat call-to-occupy, Lucy's soulful plea to preserve the income gap, and the Puffys' catchy ditty about oligarchy as meritocracy.

The pace drags at times, especially in simultaneous scenes with long freeze-frames. But it's an awfully funny show, and its opposite-day conceit ingeniously turns the inherent reductionism of agitprop fables into an object of parody. It's refreshing to know that this time we're supposed to laugh at the good-guys-and-bad-guys simplicity of the tale, rather than suspecting that we're supposed to take that part at least seriously.

Sam Hurwitt's theater blog, The Idiolect, is at www.theidiolect.com. Contact him at shurwitt@gmail.com or on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/shurwitt>.

REVIEW

What: "For the Greater Good, or The Last Election"

When: 7 p.m. July 19

Where: Mill Valley Community Center, 180 Camino Alto, Mill

Valley Tickets: Free (donations accepted)

Information: 285-1717, www.sfmt.org

Rating: ***HI

More: Performances run through Sept. 9 at various Bay Area locations and times

Photo:

Activist Damian Landless (Reggie D. White) paints his bold socialist vision for a horrified Lucy Fairweather (Velina Brown), recently back from Afghanistan in the San Francisco Mime troupe's 'For the Greater Good, or The Last Election'

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