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## **Review - The Birds, from Cromulent Shakespeare Company**

**By Matthew Everett**

Here's a show that deserves much bigger audiences than it's getting in the glut of holiday shows right now.

The Cromulent Shakespeare Company's production of Aristophanes' comedy "The Birds" is as good in its way with this ancient Greek text as the Guthrie was last season with their sleek compelling production of "Oedipus."

We're hunting in very different territory in a way - this is comedy rather than tragedy - but both sprang from the same society, and both are concerned with the nature of politics, power and leadership, both well-used and misused, both subject to human weaknesses. In "The Birds," this is cause for a great deal of merriment.

Two human friends go in search of a new home which will provide them with a comfortable way of life without the bother of too many taxes and laws. They link up with the society of birds and concoct a scheme by which they can rule over not only the sky, but their fellow men below and the gods above. And against all odds, they actually manage to pull it off.

There's a whole lot to like here. While it's a thinking person's comedy, there's plenty of lowbrow moments to go with the higher brow ones. This is Aristophanes, after all. He knew how to please an audience made up of all different sorts. The adaptation, by director Greg Bauhof, is first-rate. The chief challenge in mounting a classic comedy text, particularly one that was very topical in its long ago day, is finding a way to translate that political humor into a modern context. Bauhof does a marvelous job of breathing new life into the script while staying true to the original content and spirit. He doesn't try to convert it into a modern type of playscript. He embraces the theatrical conventions of ancient Greek theater, tweaking and turning them to his advantage. The direction and acting capitalize even further on the strengths of the script adaptation.

For instance, the chorus of twelve actors, male and female, could have been deadly dull, chanting reams of text in unison. Instead, the choral passages are continually in flux - now full group, then various combinations of different smaller groups. When ten of the chorus take on their bird personas, each is individual, with its own personality and behavioral quirks, yet still part of the larger bird society. There is always something going on on the periphery. The stage is alive with movement, that reinforces rather than distracts from the main action. Mary Karcz's sharp work as Movement Director is to be commended.

The performances of the actors are key, since this is a no-frills design - again, much in the same way it was originally intended to be performed. Five black wooden boxes and a flowered doorway are all the decoration this simple plain wood stage gets. The whole cast is dressed in black T-shirts and pants, with only a mask and the occasional accessory to give a hint of costumed identity. From this, the cast and director create a world. The performers are not limited to the boundaries of the stage either. As the evening progresses, they venture further and further into the audience on the main floor and the balcony area encircling the theater above.

The bird masks - yet again, a nod to the tradition from which the play was born - are colorful and vary over a wide spectrum of the bird family. The names and habits of birds figure prominently in the text - to both comic and poetic effect.

Special mention must be made of the almost superhuman performance of Derek Miller as Pisthetairos, the primary architect of the humans' plan to take over the skies. Miller is on stage for literally all but a couple of minutes of its nearly two hour running time without a break. He has pages upon pages of dialogue and, like the rest of the cast, sails through it at a breakneck pace, still without losing the audience in his dust. It's a deeply funny and engagingly clever performance which helps hold the show together. Everyone in the cast gets their moment to shine, and they do, in a host of supporting roles, but Miller leads the pack.

In addition to their birdly duties, chorus members step out as other human and otherworldly characters - of particular note: Brian Hesser pulls off two very different over the top turns as a wordy priest and Hercules. Heather Quigley is a lot of fun as the goddess Iris, who just doesn't want to let anyone else be the center of attention (in character, of course). Jen Usellis is most amusing as a Triballian God whose incoherent babbling can't be understood even by her fellow gods. Grant Henderson and Katie Willer are both the best of the birds and get in some nice moments without feathers - Henderson as Prometheus always ducking for cover under an umbrella, and Willer as a hilariously bad poet. The ensemble is rounded out by Susie Kaster, Rachel McLuen, Charles Numrich, Erin Stuhlfaut, Annie Wallick, and Derek "Duck" Washington - each of whom offers a lot individually and in the larger cast to making this ancient text an intriguing and entertaining modern evening of theater.

Though the script is lean and the cast is quick, it's still a marathon for the audience, clocking in at about an hour and forty-five minutes with no intermission. However, a production this good, of the sort of comedic play one doesn't get to see that often, is well worth the effort. It rewards your attention with witty lines and food for thought, often both at the same time. This is clearly a group with vision, who aim to entertain with an updated satire that hits its target just as soundly today as it must have when it was first performed. That's no small feat.

There's still one last chance to catch this flock in action - tonight, Saturday, December 3rd, 2005, at 8pm, at Walker Community Church - 3104 - 16th Avenue South in Minneapolis. Tickets - \$10 reserved, and student; \$12 at the door. Group discounts available. For more information or to make a reservation, call 612-735-4328 or email [cromulentshakespeareco@yahoo.com](mailto:cromulentshakespeareco@yahoo.com). Highly recommended.