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December 09, 2009

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IRREVERENCE UNWRAPPED

Gutenberg! The Musical! earns its exclamation points

By Keith A. Joseph



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Without a sprig of holly, a dash of New Testament or a smidgen of Scrooge, Dobama Theatre has found ways to satiate some of our most profound Yuletide yearnings. As partakers of Viagra may know, there's an urgent desire in our society for constant resurrection.

So first let us proclaim that the theater's new space in the annex of the Cleveland Heights/University Heights Library has the same cozy, semi-round thrust stage and intimacy of its Coventry Road predecessor, sans the frightening smells and sounds of scraping chairs issuing from the bar above.

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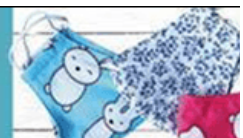
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be mired in a stew, as Johnny Mercer might have put it, desiccated whimsy.

Gutenberg! The Musical! opened off-Broadway in 2006 and has become the darling of such hip metropolises as Chicago. Written for a two-man cast, it brings to mind a mini-*Producers*. Best of all, it unequivocally lives up to its two exclamation points. The premise finds two desperate writers of a musical frantically acting out their latest creation in hopes of attracting the interest of one of the many producers they sense are lurking in the audience.

Their musical is a Mel Brooksian spin on the life of the inventor of the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg. Like two amphetamine-enriched professors, they don a multitude of caps, playing character types ranging from anti-Semites to an evil monk, while bringing to life a bountiful cast of enough singers, dancers and farceurs to populate Sardi's.

Written by Scott Brown and Anthony King for themselves, the show is like a circus ball being spun dexterously on the nose of a seal for two helium-filled hours. Without the aid of a ringmaster to keep it afloat, this ball could easily deflate. Local comic doyen Marc Moritz, in his first area directing assignment, excels.

Both Dane Castle and Christopher Richards are products of Kent State University's musical-theater program, proving that Baldwin-Wallace College doesn't hold the monopoly on collegiate brilliance in things thespian. Seeing these dynamic twentysomethings gives us an inkling of what it must have been like to have discovered burgeoning comic geniuses like the early Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis playing Vegas.

Richards, whether playing half of a two-man chorus line or fluttering arms like a love-struck *fräulein*, has comedic grace that borders on the balletic. Watching this intensely likable young actor in action almost seems compensation for missing the emerging Tom Hanks at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival in the 1970s.

The smaller Castle, with his baby-like aggression and knack for italicizing insecurity, infuses each scene with comic verisimilitude. In the George Burns tradition, he's the comic straight man who makes his partner sparkle.

Gutenberg! The Musical! confirms that the greatest gift sometimes comes wrapped in irreverence.

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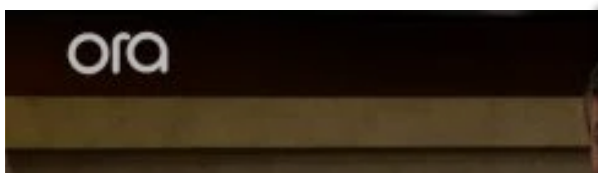
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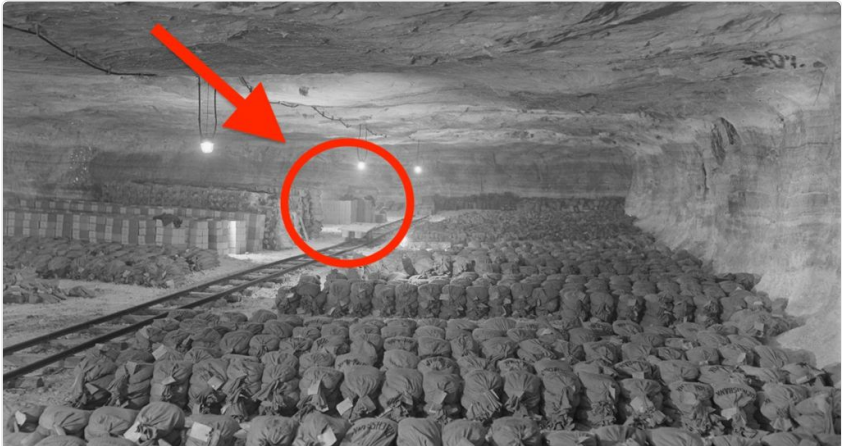
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