

See This: 'Gutenberg! The Musical!'

Written by Brian Patrick Thornton

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The most exciting local production of the holiday season looks as if it cost about \$215.32.

After all, how much could two actors, a couple of cardboard boxes, a black marker and about three dozen blue-and-white trucker caps cost?

Regardless of the cost, if you're a lover of musical theater, here's the quick verdict on Dobama Theatre's regional premiere of ***Gutenberg! The Musical!***:

See it. See it now, and maybe see it often.

If you're a careful reader, you caught my minor caveat: This is a show for musical-theater lovers, filled with industry references. So you'll probably enjoy it if you're a casual fan, but chances are much better if you're a die-hard.

How so? The plot of *Gutenberg!* is a sales pitch by two writer-composer-lyricists who are staging a reading of their new musical about the invention of the moveable-type printing press. Shockingly, a topic not yet tackled by Frank Wildhorn (a reference you'll get if you're one of those musical snobs I mentioned a moment ago).

It's not their first stab at a musical (in the past, they tell us, they flopped while trying to integrate all of Stephen King's stories into one show). But they're so supremely confident in their latest creation — which is historically accurate only as far as a German man named Gutenberg did, in fact, invent a printing press once upon a time — that they're staging it for potential producers to fund the inevitable Broadway run.

But since they're still waiting for a producing angel, they've got no funds for other actors, props or sets. So they tackle all of the roles — from Gutenberg to his nemesis, the evil monk; love interest, Helvetica; and numerous townspeople, including the bootblack and the anti-Semitic little girl — through quick-change costumes consisting of those aforementioned trucker hats.

Written by a duo associated with the comedy troupe Upright Citizens Brigade, *Gutenberg!* tosses the jokes — and not just about theater, but gays, Jews, blacks — at a fast and furious pace. (Don't worry, nothing will make your progressive blood boil.)

But the production's success rides on the duo on stage — played at Dobama by Dane Castle and Chris Richards. The young actors, both products of the Kent State musical theater program, gamely dive into a nearly two-hour frenetic mix of dialogue, songs and slapstick.

And they're terrific.

Richards is the handsome, pliable-faced salesman (think late-night QVC) willing to go almost any distance for a joke (three words: stool-leg sodomy), while Castle is the versatile, powerful-voiced performer who transforms himself into a diverse, rapid-fire mix of characters (his Southern Baptist-style evil Monk and demur Helvetica are highlights). The actors/dynamos have fantastic chemistry, and an almost unbelievable font of energy that keeps the action crashing toward the finale.

Director Marc Moritz has pulled together a zippy production that provides genuine laughs (that nicely combat the impending blahs as we enter our dreary Cleveland winter).

And even if the one knock I can make is that the music is toe-tapping in the moment and mostly forgettable minutes after the house lights come up, altogether *Gutenberg!* is December's highlight and not to be missed.

The Details

Gutenberg! The Musical!

Through Jan. 2, 2010

Dobama Theatre (2340 Lee Road, Cleveland Heights)

Tickets are \$10-\$22 and available at www.dobama.org.

(Special New Year's Eve performance is \$50 and includes hats, noisemakers and champagne.)