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The Frogs and The Nightingale

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The Frogs

Rating: ★★★★★

When it comes to classic Greek plays Aristophanes', *The Frogs* has not aged well. Even seasoned practitioners like Nathan Lane and Stephen Sondheim have suffered critically by attempting to give this dated tale an engaging twist. In essence *The Frogs* recounts Dionysus' meandering journey to Hades with his slave Xanthias, where he oversees a debate between Euripides and Aeschylus to determine which is the greatest poet. The ensuing debate is essentially a Q and A duelling contest, which takes up most of the second act. In the hands of a lesser troupe than Nightingale the result might have been a disaster. Yet Nightingale's recent production of *The Frogs*, based on a new translation by Amy Page, managed to create enough memorable moments, even if ultimately it didn't take enough risks.

Page's translation works hard to make *The Frogs* relevant to a contemporary audience, but unfortunately comes up a little short. Given recent cutbacks in funding to the arts, with threats of even more to come, Page's exploration of the political and practical importance of art is indeed timely. But this translation speaks to the converted and plays it far too safe. In honouring the text too faithfully it failed to capture the original spirit of *The Frogs* which delights in being irreverent with more than a hint of the raunchy and rowdy to highlight its concerns. This faithfulness is best seen in the debate itself where too strong an adherence to its original theme meant stakes were low, relevance was minimal and very little dramatic or political interest was generated.

If Page's *The Frogs* pitches its tent too comfortably on the safe side of predictable, Nightingales production did shine theatrically and Page's script provided them with more than enough to play with. Thankfully director John Cruncleton, who appeared as Dionysus, brought a strong degree of playfulness to proceedings which moved along nicely. Pace was tight and performances well pitched throughout, the most memorable being Cruncleton's own ponce like Dionysus who was perfectly complimented by a world weary Xanthias, played superbly by Joseph Gomez. Oversized masks, costumes that seemed conscious of themselves as costumes and a stage full of cheap, theatrical effects (as when Dionysus is rowing, the actor moving the artificial waves is crouched in plain sight) lent this production a somewhat meta-theatrical quality which was often imaginative and fun.

But if Nightingale's *The Frogs* was sometimes fun, imaginative and theatrical, it wasn't quite fun, theatrical or imaginative enough. Like its tame handling of sexual innuendos, it was never quite daring, sexy or risky enough to really make its impact felt. The end result was a production that ultimately, and uncharacteristically, veered a little too much on the safe side of reverence. Though it did have some thoroughly enjoyable moments and something important it wanted to say.

Coming next at the Nightingale is Odeum Theatre's Production of *Gruesome Playground Injuries* by Rajiv Joseph, which runs March 8th -10th and 15th - 17th. That's followed by *Farmer's Daughter*, described as a vaudeville cabaret which runs March 30th and 31st and April 6th and 7th. May sees the opening of *Warm Delicious Play* by John Cruncleton which runs May 18th, 19th, 25th, 26th and June 1st and 2nd.

Contact www.nightingaletheater.com for more details.



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