

THEATER REVIEW



A top-notch ensemble cast including (clockwise from left) Bob Kulhan, Matthew Van Colton, Julia Siple, Jacqueline Stone, Martin Marion and Dan Findley helps lift "The Birds" in a lean new translation at the Viaduct Theatre.

Djukic's 'The Birds' soars, but it doesn't fully connect

By Chris Jones
Tribune arts critic

Aristophanes, that wily old Greek with the satiric bent, is far harder to produce today than most theater companies realize. For every decent "Lysistrata," you see, another dozen crash and burn. Aristophanic musical adaptations ("The Frogs" et al) aren't exactly guaranteed laugh riots. And even "The Birds" — without question his most watchable play today — is usually a tougher slog for an audience than the people on the stage would like.

Why all the Aristophanic snafus in the modern theater?

Nothing dates faster than satire — check those old "Weekend Update" routines — and Aristophanic society, with its meddling polytheistic gods and all, was greatly different from our own. And even though generations of theater artists have tried to turn him into a critical progressive, Aristophanes (like most ancient Athenians, save the oft-ridiculed Euripides) had a stubborn conservative streak. So there's often a disconnect between script and concept.

To its great credit, Zeljko Djukic's fine production of "The Birds," in a lean new transla-

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tion by Hurt McDermott, avoids these problems. Or, at least, it avoids most of them.

This is mainly because the Bosnian-born Djukic is such an accomplished visual stylist and a director so adept at getting actors to fully inhabit a kind of neo-absurdist world with a logic all its own.

T.U.T.A. Theatre Company shows have a very distinctive style — they are far more physically adroit than most Chicago productions. Also, they deftly effect that Euro-friendly collusion of eclectic styles — wherein overt political references can dissolve smoothly and easily into a fashion show accompanied by bubble gum pop.

Instead of relying mainly on Aristophanic gags, Djukic crafts his own cohesive comic milieu with echoes of Beckett, neo-vaudeville and the Cirque du Soleil. The man is a director with an actual overarching vision — and there are few things

"The Birds"

When: Through April 30

Where: Viaduct Theatre, 3111 N. Western Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes

Tickets: \$20 at 847-217-0691

in the theater more refreshing than that.

The central premise behind "The Birds" is that a couple of earth-bound wiseguys have persuaded the feathered creatures to set up a utopian border town with the happy geographical advantage of falling right between God-land and Earth. So the show basically is set in the sky with a cast of birds and wannabes.

Djukic solves that problem with a series of metallic hoops and a cast that opens and closes umbrellas as if they were gnashing their beaks. It's a great look, greatly aided by Natasha Djukic's wild costumes and a top-notch ensemble cast with the likes of Trey Maclin and Matthew Van Colton.

That said, this show suffers from a lack of overall dramatic tension and an inclination to splutter. Some of the individual moments are spectacularly inventive, but the piece never fully hooks into the play's big issues — the ideas necessary to pull an audience from one moment to the next with any kind of compulsive force.

What are the compromises of revolution? How do you make tyrants grovel? Is power all that fun, anyway? That kind of thing.

Therein, as often, Aristophanes remains an elusive creature, stuck up in the ancient clouds.

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