

Theater

Birds

Playwright: adapted by Hurt McDermott,
from the play by Aristophanes
At: Utopian Theatre Asylum at the
Viaduct, 3111 N. Western Ave.
Phone: (847) 217-0691; \$20
Runs through: April 30

BY MARY SHEN BARNIDGE

A pair of slackers set out in search of the easy life ("Not a BETTER country," shrugs one, "just a less ambitious one") and when they find it, they promptly transform it into a replica of what they vowed to escape. Sound familiar? Even more disturbing than Aristophanes' observations on the follies of his own society is their applicability to our own. Have we learned NOTHING since 400 BC?

Our two dropouts are Ready and Happy. Their destination, the skies where Tereus the bird-king dwells. To allay the mistrust of the avian citizenry, Ready proposes a plan to demand a fee on traffic between the earth and the heavens. Their nation is dubbed "Cloudcukopolis", a wall is constructed at the expense of many lives, and a military force drafted (mostly comprised of barnyard fowl, whom Ready declares unfit for "higher things"). Immigration is restricted, dissenting opinions are suppressed, and "Committees of Vigilant Patriots" sniff out traitors, who are executed and eaten. The gods protest, but soon are brought to heel by the ruthlessly empowered Cloudcukopolitans.

Hurt McDermott's adaptation of Aristophanes' text is a delight, its breezily contemporary tone easily comprehended by academics and ignorami alike. Literary allusions ("You don't expect me to believe that someone could write an interesting play about The Clouds, do you?") abound, side-by-side with casual colloquialisms—"Trying to kill a bird with two stones, huh?"—and flat-out puns ("I'd forget my head if it weren't attached to the body politic."). Whoever knew that so much of our language borrowed from our forefeathers?

It's not just clever words, however: For this world premiere production, The Utopian Theatre Asylum has assembled a technical team of Olympian imagination. Natasha Bogojevich's musical score ranges from delta blues to African-jazz fusion, Ann Davis and Natasha Vuchurovich Djukic's skeletal-metal scenery simultaneously suggests clouds and cages, while the latter's fanciful costumes are a shimmering rainbow of brilliant hues. The spectacle never eclipses the performances, however, and a cast led by Matthew Van Colton's innocent-faced Ready and anchored by Jennifer Byers' eloquent scarlet-plumed Chorus more than redeemed any opening night—well, flightiness—to promise this world premiere a soaring future.