

Review: Laughter is served at Lab Theater's 'Empty Plate'



CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 9:32 a.m. EDT June 9, 2016



(Photo: Picasa)

Don't think too hard about the premise, and you'll be OK.

In Lab Theater's new comedy, a millionaire journalist visits the Paris restaurant he owns. Victor's plan: To sit there at his table and slowly starve to death. His frantic staff, desperate to keep him alive, talks Victor into letting them describe what they're cooking, instead.

But here's a big question: Why exactly would someone go to a restaurant to starve to death? Wouldn't it be easier to just do his Last Supper at home?

And then there's the fact that Victor is supposed to be a millionaire newspaper journalist from America. Is there such a creature, even way back in 1961?

But don't worry about it. Some of that is explained later. And, besides, there's more to "An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf" than its far-fetched premise.

Michael Hollinger's one-act existential farce starts out loony, but it slowly digs deep until you're struck by its unexpected sadness and beauty. Then, of course, there's that surprise at the end with the crème brulee.

Directed by Barry Hazen, "Empty Plate" doesn't always go down smoothly. The French accents are hit and miss (or nonexistent). Some scenes can't quite get moving. And [Ken Bryant's](#) Victor just isn't captivating enough to be the focal point for the show.

But when it does work, "Empty Plate" can be very, very funny. Take, for example, the well-staged scene where the entire restaurant staff tries to figure out what happened to Victor's longtime girlfriend. Or Juan Alejandro's busboy playing a hilariously bad version of "The Lady from Spain" on a tuba. Or a funny moment involving lipstick and Mike Dinko's smearing attempt to wipe it off his face.

As for Bryant, it's not that he's bad in his role as the world-weary, depressed expatriate Victor. I just wish he was more expressive and showed stronger comedic timing. He's outshined in just about every moment by the rest of the cast.

That problem becomes particularly clear later in the play, when the Hemingway-worshipping Victor reenacts a crucial moment involving a bull fight and a failed romantic proposal. The whole scene fizzles and flails and never manages to pull in the audience — a critical failing for such a key scene.

That being said, "Empty Plate" is worth seeing for its poetic language, its laughs and its solid supporting cast.

The colorful restaurant staff includes a stuttering, eager young busboy (Alejandro); a fiery, unsatisfied waitress (Marta Sand); and a frustrated chef Gaston (Dave Matthew Chesebro, who inexplicably has an American accent, but still manages to get some big laughs despite being offstage much of the time).

This is really Dinko's show, though, and he throws himself into the role like I've never seen him do before. He's especially great when serving each dish with a flourish and describing the roasted pheasant, vodka tomato sorbet, rabbit consomme and other food. And he does it all with a hilariously outrageous French accent, rolling his 'r's and talking about one dish's "t-t-t-titillating onions."

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Sure, the show has its problems. But I laughed many times, and I had an unexpectedly emotional reaction by the end. So director Hazen and his cast are definitely doing something right.

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If you go

What: "An Empty Plate in the Cafe Du Grand Boeuf"

When: Now through July 2. Performances are 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday.

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown [Fort Myers](#)

Tickets: \$21 (\$10 for students)

Info: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com (<http://laboratorytheaterflorida.com/>).

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