

Review: Silly "Nosemaker's" takes scalpel to society, surgery at Lab Theater

By CHRIS SILK

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Beauty is only skin deep. But don't tell Gavin, the Nosemaker's Apprentice. He's a wizard with a nip of this, a dash of that. Gavin can work medieval medical miracles. Why, the Queen of France parades around in a pair of Triple DDDs fashioned from a pair of pig's bladders filled with finest *beurre*.

Beauty is only skin deep. That's the lesson. Or maybe it isn't? Unnecessary plastic surgery is against the will of God? A guest appearance from a post-surgery Satan would seem to indicate so. Who knows! Finding out is worth a chuckle or three in the Lab Theater's latest charming absurdity, "The Nosemaker's Apprentice: Chronicles of a Medieval Plastic Surgeon."

Framed as a "fairy tale," told by an alcoholic father to a sleepy 8-year-old, "Nosemaker's" spills the story of Gavin, the titular "nosemaker's apprentice." We follow Gavin from the Ivanhoe Workhouse for Criminally Impoverished Boys to the Nosemaker's Academy in Vienna and the palace of the Queen of France. Silly, outlandish and each scene more ridiculous than the last, call it a fractured fairy tale about love and noses.

The nutty premise, terrifying descriptions and bizarre medical procedures openly mock society's fascination with physical beauty, glossy perfection and faddish trends. The show manages to get in subtle digs at even the most basic cosmetics, like nail polish, wigs, rouge, lipstick and eye liner.

Director Ken Bryant gets the goofy concept of the Nick Jones and Rachel Shukert script. He wants an over-the-top romp, with each scene adding to the next, ending in a bright, fun concoction.

Bryant has the right idea, but for a show that imagines you can make a nose from the spleen of a badger and bile from the bladder of an ox, it's just not quite enough. "Nosemaker's" needs to start at "Mentos in Diet Coke" fizz and end at something near Mount St. Helens. It's that redonkulous.

Still, I love some of the smaller touches Bryant brings to the work, including a repeatedly laugh-out-loud exploration of the show's more ... perverted themes. (At least an R for language). Watching various and sundry characters try to seduce poor Gavin in any number of locales on stage (or his body!) never fails to bring a laugh.

Wil Harbison brings a wide-eyed innocence to Gavin. Bryant asks for apple-cheeked sincerity - and Harbison gives it in spades - finding a sing-song cadence for the lines and heroic style of movement that belies the hapless Gavin's misadventures. Connor Zerilla bids fair to steal the show in multiple roles; his hysterically deranged performance gives the show a much-needed boost.

Look for the purposefully outré scene where Zerilla's French manservant fondles Harbison's Gavin - even as Gavin keeps slapping his pawing hands away. Harbison delivers a long monologue - complete with tones, inflection, emotion (and a perfectly straight face - even as the groping gets more and more energetic and the crowd breaks down into near convulsions. A true highlight - and the kind of over-the-top insanity I wish the show could find a way to hit on a consistent basis.

Chelsea Lange serves up regal sass as a delightfully Antoinette-inspired La Reine. Her Amelia (Pond, perhaps, with that red hair?) is at once winsome and wistful as the object of Gavin's affection. Playing an eight-year-old and clad in pajamas, Lange makes the "story time" scenes with a cheerily boozed Todd Fleck seem authentic. Bryant also appears as a kindly mentor and a teacher at the nose-maker's school.

Lois Kuehne's costumes add a touch of mythical sparkle, with bronze and gold tunics, leggings and gowns. I love the hipster touch of having characters keep their brightly colored sneakers - a link to the "real" world - and the garish outfit on Fleck's character. Bryant's set - stonework in shades of gray - resembles both a castle from any book of tales and a vague Punch and Judy puppet show both; both are appropriate.

"Nose-maker's" definitely makes you think about just how long you spent in front of the mirror before grabbing the keys, heading out the door and hopping in the car.

Just how vain are we? The answer comes in the show's signature line, delivered by Harbison in a heaving, desperate sigh as his Gavin realizes the depth he's sunk to. "After lunch, if time permits, I will attempt to make her pet yorkie "less Jewish looking." Think I'm joking? If you Google "plastic surgery for dogs," you get 17,500,000 results.

"Nose-maker's" offers a sometimes goofy, sometimes giddy, always thoughtful look at beauty and our obsessions with it. Connor Zerilla lights up the stage - and makes you believe he's having a blast doing it - as any of several nutty characters. Considering plastic surgery? Schedule a visit with "The Nose-maker's Apprentice."

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