

## ***BIG LOVE***

***when Thurs. - Sun.***

***through Sept. 23, 8 p.m.***

***where The Off Center Theater***

By Sam Cahill

Daily Texan Staff

The Spice Girls may be sliding down the slippery slope to musical obscurity, but girl power lives on and nowhere more vibrantly than in the Rude Mechanicals' production of Charles Mee's *Big Love*.

A loose adaptation of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women*, the play explores the motivations and conflicting philosophies that lead to 50 brides (all sisters) making a pact to murder their would-be rapist grooms. It's a dark tale concerning the intersection of love and power, security and dominance, Justice and Law, and the hope and risk involved in seeking political asylum.

But before you decide that murder and rape aren't your idea of a good time at the theater, let me say that *Big Love* is probably the best play currently running in Austin for sheer entertainment value. *Big Love* scores points for both emotional and intellectual impact as well as for overall coolness and that's a tough combination to beat.

The acting is great. The sisters (only three appear on stage: Lana Lesley, Sarah Richardson, Shawn Sides), on the run from their grooms, are brash, endearing, and fun, a characterization established right away by their girl-power-tour-de-force lyrics: "We must be invincible/We can't afford to be innocent." The lyrics read hostile and pushy, but they perform like Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." The sisters are fun and friendly, and they like men they're not (all) vicious, emasculating harpies. But as engaging as the sisters are, the supporting cast frequently gives them a run for their money.

Karen Kuykendall, who plays a double role, commands the stage whether she is likening men to squashed tomatoes or sipping a martini while disturbing the sisters with descriptions of bizarre sexual positions. Bill Johnson, as one of her character's son, Piero usually present in a smoking jacket with a glass of wine in hand is the quintessential decadent mamma's boy. Jon S. Watson plays the sisters' gay friend, Giuliano, the only fully sympathetic male in the play. He is perhaps the most complex character holding attention in such varied situations as when he expresses silent anguish, philosophizes on the uncertainty of love, or does a Fred-Astaire-and-Ginger-Rogers style dance with a broom. This dance number is truly adorable; it would carry the production if

*Big Love* weren't already so much fun.

But the music selection is the real star of the production. It runs the gamut from the sweet reminiscence of the classic "Tenderly," to the sonic speed-chase of Nine Inch Nails' "Complication." Every musical selection adds an exciting dimension to the activities on stage.

So while most of the scenes are entertaining, it's the music scenes that truly enthrall. For instance, the wedding-night sequence with its concise staging and hard-hitting symbolism has plenty of thrills and chills; but it's the aptly titled "Complication" that makes explicit the sinister exhilaration underlying the simultaneous depiction of murder and sex.

Yet while the play overall is a resounding success, the big flaw in *Big Love* is the blatant illogic of the grooms' philosophy, as formulated by their ring leader, Constantine: Women must be raped in order for them to understand the violence that men must live with (it never occurs to the grooms that women, forced to deal with violence, would use it themselves which is exactly what happens when the sisters murder them). For the main villain's philosophy to get deflated so easily is unsatisfying; the grooms are just straw-men set up in order to be torn down. But at least the grooms' untenable philosophical position and emotional retardation are conveyed with humor, insight and solid acting.

And the grooms aren't all bad. One of the sisters, Lydia, falls in love with her groom and doesn't murder him, thereby violating the pact she and her sisters had made. This violation leads to the final judgment scene, which while the scene itself lacks the energy of the rest of the play raises the pertinent issue of how to deal with a conflict between Justice and Law. Should Lydia be executed for treason for violating the sisters' social contract? "No," decides the judge, because "Love trumps all."

The same could be said of the Rude Mechanicals' production of *Big Love*.



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