

Exhibitionism

Chronicle Review

DON B'S SNOW WHITE: LOST AMONG THE DWARVES

The Off Center Warehouse

Through April 24

Running Time: 2 hrs, 45 min

As their latest offering, the Rude Mechanicals have crafted an unlikely adaptation of Donald Barthelme's 1965 seminal piece of postmodern fiction. Unlikely because, although inspired and goofy, Barthelme's retelling of the infamous fairy tale is in the form of a disjointed, somewhat uncrackable novel which uses its source's recognizable archetypes -- wicked stepmother, whistling dwarves, naïve heroine -- to express the author's own intuitions about the unravelling world at large. It is so decidedly literary that bringing it to the stage seems a daunting task. And yet the novel is also very much in line with both the spirit of absurd theatre that the Rude Mechs truly love and the company's successful forays into scrambling classic texts (e.g., *curst & Shrewd*, the Rude Mechs' fractured version of *The Taming of the Shrew*). Indeed, this brash pastiche of the childhood favorite contains all the commendable elements that have made past productions from this group such smashes: a knowing sense of the absurd, the whimsical, the vulgar, along with the collaborative efforts of some very funny, very twisted artists.



But call me crazy: *Snow White* didn't make much sense.

In this incarnation, Snow White is a "horsewife" tired of bowing to the needs of seven demanding dwarves -- or, in this case, seven grown men. In fact, in this kingdom, it seems most everyone is bored with the status quo. The leader of the dwarves, Bill, does the unprecedented by pulling away and questioning the old routine. Even the loathsome, vitriolic Hugo de Bergerac and sleazy Jane seem unsatisfied, waiting for something -- however vile -- to fill the void. Before too

long, the once-satisfied Snow White is doing the unthinkable: furiously writing poetry. Meanwhile, she props up a female blow-up doll at the window, where she had previously stood, toothsome and unnoticed, her raven locks flowing from her balcony like Rapunzel's. So where's her Prince Charming, you may ask? Well, the bratty, indulgent Paul is running off to join a monastery. So much for happy endings.

At first glance, it may not seem all that puzzling. The difficulty comes in the show's tone, which shifts from one genre to another. Is it a burlesque? The debauchery in which these fairy tale heroes engage seems to indicate that it is. Is it a political and social statement? The parallel between Snow White's liberation and that of Sixties women seems a no-brainer. Is it a spoof of academics? Phrases are intermittently projected onto the wall, mocking the blathering academese of professors (they're the titles of chapters in the book), and long monologues ape the meandering tone of a thesis paper. Or is the show just meant to be pure fun, with its dancing apes and sexual innuendo? One thing is for sure: It is unconventional. But by not setting a clear agenda, the group left at least one audience member scrambling for a hook, and subsequently, rather too adrift in confusion to find much of its cleverness very funny at all.

The good news is that for those unconcerned with understanding their theatre, there is plenty in this production that's solid. Not the least of it is a group of high-energy performances, among them Shawn Sides' vampy stepmonster figure, Jane, and Ehren Conner Christian's doting male servant to the not-so-princely Paul. Another plus is an imaginative use of this Eastside warehouse, sectioned off cleanly and pleasantly to give each character or collection of characters his own domain. Lana Lesley, who adapted the novel and directed the production, also gives us some genuinely fun and well-crafted moments of theatre, such as Jane's choreographed dance number with an ape and the trick of the very last scene.

Still, it's too little too late. The play sends us on a wild ride -- at times nonsensical, at times bleak, at times vulgar -- and at the end, it is quite difficult to say exactly why we took that bumpy journey, or even what we saw along the way. It is an experience my companion at the show likened to hearing a teacher read Shakespeare for the first time: It may be filled with gems, but they were all lost on me. -- *Sarah Hepola*