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Funny 'Field Guide' At Yale Rep Grand, Yet Grounded

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Please read Sam Wasson's history of improvisational theater "Improv Nation — How We Made a Great American Art." It describes how small theater troupes of the 1950s and 1960s such as The Compass, Second City and The Premise began as hyper-intellectual exercises in devising multifaceted dramatic/comedic tales using only their special collaborative theater techniques. The comedy ended up washing away all the references to Chekhov, Brecht and the ancient Greeks.

Please see "Field Guide" by Rude Mechs, having its premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre through Feb. 17. Rude Mechs (based in Austin Texas, but familiar to New Haven audiences from two previous Yale visits) seems to have nailed that original mix of heady drama and irreverent satire. It pulls from great traditions, yet is immediate and alive. It's dark, it's deep and it happens to be very funny too.

"Field Guide" is low-tech, earthy, grounded in raw human emotions. It's silly and sensitive at the same time. The pre-show counsel to silence cellphones is delivered in a mumbly, shy, Kermit-the-Frog-style voice (which later turns out to be the voice of a large black bear). A halting, insecure stand-up comedy routine (by company member Hannah Kenah, using her own name when performing these bits) begins by explaining the jokes in advance: "The premise of this next joke is that I'm British." The show's obsessions with pop psychology and Russian Literature collide with this chiding remark: "Families should stop reuniting. It's a bad practice."

"Field Guide" punctures literary pretensions. It explores humanity, then removes the human performers from the stage altogether and lets the set shift around by itself. Its concepts are monumental and imposing, but the tools it uses are common: cardboard, fake beards, a mic stand.

"Field Guide" has three main themes, which double as the three main performance styles: the sweeping novelistic narrative of Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov," the honesty and urgency of stand-up comedy, and the feel-good dogma of self-help manuals.

When these threads get woven together, it's magical. A bear (Lowell Bartholomee) steps up to the microphone, loosens up the crowd, then launches into an extensive monologue on uncluttering one's life and letting things go. These insights are delivered as if this were a motivational lecture, but the talk is also about the very bear-like practice of hibernation.

As with the content and formats of the piece itself, the actors' styles can vary wildly. Of the six-person cast, Thomas Graves and Robert S. Fisher, who carry much of the Russian story, can seem the most actorly. Hannah Kenah goes for a disarming no-artifice manner. Mari Akita performs a modern dance mid-show. Lowell Bartholomee is the most aggressively funny. Lana Lesley disappears credibly into male serf roles.

There is some simplicity to this show that can come off as lightweight. Russia is evoked by cheesy peasant costumes, a bear and a red curtain. There's an obligatory Trump joke. Sure, there's ironic intent in this, but perhaps not enough.

<http://www.courant.com/entertainment/arts-theater/hc-fea-review-field-guide-yale-rep-20180205-story.html>



When Rude Mechs does dig deep, it transcends, astounds and elevates. The troupe doesn't just question social standards and behavior, it examines the very means we generally use to figure out those things.

It doesn't want to dramatize "The Brothers Karamazov" as much as it wants to analyze and explain it. It doesn't just use stand-up comedy as a device; it turns this person-and-mic-stand trope into a public baring of the soul. It looks beneath affirmations and aphorisms for real meaning.

After some deft foreshadowing and hint-dropping, Rude Mechs inflates a huge object (which I'll keep secret) onstage at the end of the show for maximum metaphorical impact. But the performers do not inflate themselves. This is a not a pompous group of actors telling us what to think or when to laugh. This is a thoughtful group of social scientists on a quest for truth. They're charming, accessible, provocative, funny and fun to watch. They know your mind may wander, so they offer regular jolts of jollity, and awesome stage effects. On a budget. On a real world scale. Before your eyes, and inside your head.

FIELD GUIDE, created by Rude Mechs, is performed through Feb. 17 at the Yale Repertory Theatre, 1120 Chapel St., New Haven. Performances are Tuesday through Friday at 8 p.m. and Saturday at 2 and 8 p.m. Tickets are \$44 to \$90. 203-432-1234 and yalerep.org.