

Family Meeting: The Brothers Marx Comes to Daydream Theatre

Daydream Theatre, fuelled by the always unique creations of playwright Lenny Schwartz, stands alone in the crowded field of Rhode Island independents. Whether presenting bizarre glimpses of post-apocalyptic shopping frenzies or skillfully crafted narrative biographies, Daydream has carved out a niche at the Bell Street Chapel. Free of the shackles of subscriber concerns, audience demographics, or production royalties, Schwartz and Company are free to explore whatever fancy they wish and we're all the better for it. Daydream's current offering, *The Brothers Marx*, follows in the tradition of their superb Buster Keaton biography and offers a skillfully presented, yet charmingly ramshackle, account of the lives and careers of Groucho and his siblings.

A quick glance at any Marx Brothers history will sum up the essential plot points, but in Schwartz's hands, it's not merely a rehash of events, but a nicely developed interweaving of first-, second-, and third-person narrative combined with re-imaginings of classic bits and performances. A dizzying display of ex-wives, agents, and internecine squabbling allows us to glimpse the Marx Brothers as people caught up in the usual struggles of love, money, and addiction, even as they climb off the vaudeville stage onto the big screen. We lose a little of the why as we race through the story, but what comes through it all is the struggle of a Jewish family in an era when global politics and entertainment gave them every reason not to succeed. What could be a touchy subject is handled with self-deprecating humor often bordering on the absurd, as when Groucho observes that brother Chico is in danger of "losing the Italian accent and sounding Jewish again." More in line with Schwartz's style is the observation that the entertainment industry was becoming "a cornucopia of Jews ... a Jew-ucopia!"

Any Daydream performance features a dizzying array of performers and *Marx* is no exception. The five titular brothers are mostly exceptional with Ryan Hanley's Groucho not only a spot-on impersonation, but a driving force for both the original humor of the script and the classic asides we expect to hear. In strong competition for focus is Beatriz Lopez as the loudly mute Harpo. The cross-gender aspect of Lopez's portrayal of everyone's favorite Marx is irrelevant here: she owns the physicality and the manic, yet melancholy, persona of the man who quietly charmed the world while maintaining his privacy. Geoffrey David Monti is a maelstrom of libido as Chico, and John Robert Faiola's Gummo Marx is commanding for his brief time on stage. It is Mat Clerrico as Zeppo who has to walk the line between obligatory straight man and overshadowed bit player. The abuse he took from his brothers in real life is palpable onstage and Clerrico struggles, as did the real Zeppo, to find his place among such dynamic personalities, which in turn, makes his performance all the more effective. And, of all the Marx brothers, Schwartz writes Zeppo as something more than two-dimensional. The cast of supporting characters who come and go throughout serve as nicely defined foils for the vagaries of the clan, and Kathleen Seagriff's over-the-top caricature of Marx mainstay Margaret Dumont is amusing and appropriate. Missy Marine, a Daydream regular, handles Groucho's first wife Ruth with grace.

Schwartz directs his own work, which serves to streamline the process, but also ensures that, for better or worse, enough goofy humor filters through whatever seriousness may be embedded in the subject matter. *The Brothers Marx* ventures into serious territory, but as Schwartz writes, "There should be dancing in the streets when a clown comes to town."

Performances will run through November 17 at the Bell Street Chapel in Providence. For ticket information, call 401-644-2293 or visit www.smarttix.com.