

“Players” New Challenge

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“Living Dead in Denmark” is a full-length play by Vietnamese American playwright Qui Nguyen that incorporates Shakespeare, stage combat, and zombie blood and gore. “Living Dead in Denmark” begins five years after the end of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” and imagines what would happen if Fortinbras resurrected the corpses of Shakespeare’s leading ladies—Lady Macbeth, Juliet, and Ophelia—in order to fight the undead of Denmark.

“It’s a very fun, funky script that mixes Shakespeare with B-movie sensibilities and pop culture references,” Tang says. “It runs the gamut of humor from very broad to fairly literate—if you miss one highbrow joke here, don’t worry, there’s two middlebrow and one lowbrow joke coming in the next 30 seconds.”

Tang asserts that Nguyen’s play fit PFP’s mission well: His description of Nguyen’s play, he says, “pretty much describes Pork Filled shows in general, whether it’s a full-length play or a sketch comedy show.”

But Tang also admits the challenges of redirecting a sketch comedy troupe toward producing a full-length script: “We selected this show because this was a stretch for us...both physically and artistically,” he says.

The play “has a great deal of demanding stage combat, which isn’t a skill that’s been on display in a lot of Asian American plays,” he says. This project poses a special challenge to PFP’s fight choreographer, Lisa Marie Nakamura, since the production will not use any of Nguyen’s original movement or fight direction.

And, Tang adds, “Did we mention the music and singing? Well, there’s that, too.”

“We’ll always deal with comedy...humor’s our tool to dissect (or maybe bludgeon) society’s notions about race, class and gender,” he says, asking, “who said you can’t go change the world and have a belly laugh at the same time?”

Despite the emphasis on horror and action, Tang finds that the play also serves PFP's goals as an Asian American theatre company. "What was appealing was that there's a subtext to the show that's very relevant to Asian Americans, as it talks (at least in passing) about appearances, authenticity and passing," he says. "Yet it doesn't hit you over the head with these themes; it talks about them in more oblique, subtle ways."

Tang emphasizes that PFP's mission goes well beyond presenting sketch comedy. PFP intends "to present the whole voice of Asian American culture—and humor was something that was definitely underexposed and seldom seen on stage," he says. "And it's certainly consistent to take the next step and expand our efforts into more traditional areas and use our whole voice there as well."

According to Tang, the Pork Filled Players produce work in a collaborative way based upon the troupe's membership. "PFP is always changing," he says.

As a founding member and the only person who's been a member of PFP since the beginning, Tang says: "There've been three or four incarnations of the group so far and they'll probably be more as different people join and leave the group. That reflects the interests of folks who are part of the group."

But, as Artistic Director, Tang emphasizes some constant aspects of the company's mission: "We'll always deal with comedy...humor's our tool to dissect (or maybe bludgeon) society's notions about race, class and gender," he says, asking, "who said you can't go change the world and have a belly laugh at the same time?"

In addition, PFP continues to attempt to incorporate multiple different perspectives. "One of the lenses we use to look at the world is an Asian American one, and we'll always have that," Tang says. But "some of the other lenses are non-Asian lenses—we use all of them to look at the world."

"Living Dead in Denmark" won't be the last full-length play that PFP produces. "Eventually, we do want to be producing our own original, full length work...but writing a two-act play takes just a wee bit longer than cranking out three-minute scenes and it's taking us time to get cranked up," Tang says. "Then again, there's a fair amount of drama out there that hasn't been done in Seattle, so there's a happy solution there."

"Living Dead in Denmark" runs through May 24, 2008, at Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Ave. S., Seattle.