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Death Becomes Them

By Pamela Murray Winters

Quite possibly the worst first-date play of the last five centuries, *Everyman* hinges not on “Whodunit?” or “Will they do it?” but, rather, “How will a man die?” The late-medieval morality play, whose author is unknown, seems like a statement of purpose as the inaugural production by the Journeymen Theater Ensemble, whose founder and artistic director, Deborah Kirby, intends the company to “address moral issues...uplift and challenge...Our hope is that audiences will leave inspired.” That’s a lot to ask of 21st-century urbanites, especially those who undoubtedly studied the play in their Everygirl and -boy days and now tend toward more complex fare. The allegory is maddeningly simplistic: After a surprise visit by a sinuous, implacable Death (Evie Abat), who promises to return without warning, Everyman (Chris Batchelder) makes like Dorothy with his companions—but the Yellow Brick Road he asks them to follow leads to the grave. No wonder, then, that Fellowship (Jay Hardee), Kindred (Jon Reynolds), Cousin (Sarah Bever), and Goods (Katya Falikova) prove fickle. Fortunately, the play has a happy (and, just over an hour, relatively swift) ending. And even more fortunate, Kirby’s production is ingenious, heart-felt, and a treat for the eyes. The only real dud of a character is God (Gabriel Hudson), who shows up for a few minutes to be jealous and rather bland; but he’s soon back behind the metaphorical curtain, leaving us to behold the passionate struggles of Batchelder’s graying, wholly ordinary seeker. The weaker folks he meets, bedecked in Melanie Dale’s whimsical, kindergarten-tempera costumes, are as much fun as their wardrobes, in particular Hardee’s Fellowship, who wears a grubby blancmange of a body, totes a keg of brew, and speaks with overindulged Gale Gordon unctuousness. As for Everyman’s more promising associates, Tiffany Fillmore’s Good Deeds makes a joyous impression, more rapturous goodness than Sunday-school saccharine. And if the other virtues are a little dull—well, is that any surprise? Set the redemption story aside and watch these words made flesh as they glide and leap around David C. Ghatan’s gray-white set: The work of movement/fitness trainer Tanya Kinsey is made manifest by this supple, sincere cast, evoking the graceful beauty of a Stanislavsky or Synetic production. For a production in which Beauty (played by Reynolds, who might be forgiven if he were to start giggling at the mirrored Calder on his head) proves fleeting, this *Everyman* makes a bunch of pretty pictures. And for a story in which the lead character dies in the end, it’s pretty darn uplifting—at least for the future of this ambitious new company.