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Measure for Measure leaves Paul at a loss for words

By Paul Friswold

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John Lamb



A lesson in forgiveness: Jim Butz (left) and Jason Cannon star in *Measure for Measure*.

Details:

Measure for Measure

Through April 27 at the Fontbonne University Fine Arts Center Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard, Clayton.

Tickets are \$20 (\$15 for students and seniors).

Call 314-719-8060 or visit www.mustardseedtheatre.com.

Subject(s):

One of the perils of writing about the plays you see is that part of the evening is spent head-down furiously taking notes in the dark. This leads to sloppy handwriting and the occasional missed action, but it does provide you with a visual record of what you liked or didn't like about a production.

Densely worded pages are a sure indication of a great production. And then there are the sudden blank spaces on the page, where something remarkable happened onstage and the beginnings of a note are scrawled but trail off into unmarred white space — this is where the play has overwhelmed the critical faculties, and not a moment of what's happening onstage can go unseen. Mustard Seed Theatre's production of *Measure for Measure* resulted in three crabbed pages of sloppy ink, followed by a drift of white space that represents the final eight minutes of the play — white space that I would not mar for the world.

Shakespeare's story of a Duke (Jason Cannon) leaving his earnest young cousin Angelo (Jim Butz) in charge of the vice-ridden city of Vienna is both comedic and dramatic, often in quick succession. Vienna's laws have not been enforced, but the stolid Angelo will bring moral decency back to the city by any means necessary. The first victim of the new regime is Claudio (Rusty Gunther), who has impregnated his betrothed Juliette (Bess Moynihan), and who is summarily sentenced to death.

When Claudio's sister, the righteous Isabella (Jennifer Theby), pleads with Angelo for

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mercy, her articulate arguments inflame Angelo's desire, leading him to propose a deal: If Isabella will give herself to him, he will release Claudio.

Fortunately, the Duke has disguised himself as Friar Lodewick; thus hidden in plain sight, he manipulates everyone to a place of safety, but not without a few close calls.

Director Deanna Jent has excised some of the play's more convoluted passages, replacing them with an opening pantomime aided by pre-recorded segments that air on two TV monitors. The setting has been modernized, a feat aided immensely by Dennis C. Seyer's cleverly detailed set: The audience sits in a slum of dilapidated buildings, while the nobles occupy a sleek, modern office. (The transformation of all this into a dive karaoke bar in Act Two is even more impressive.)

The three leads — Jason Cannon, Jennifer Theby and Jim Butz — do marvelous work. Cannon brings a steely intelligence to the Duke, and his Friar is dry, caustic and always the smartest person in the room; Cannon playfully underlines this last fact with an arsenal of wry faces pulled for the audience's benefit. Theby's Isabella delivers her initial wave of arguments in the rhythm of plainsong, the language liquid and gorgeous in her mouth. Her finest moment, when the mercy she has argued for is asked of her, is contained in the birdlike fluttering of her throat as she swallows anger and chooses a better course.

And it is Jim Butz who created the white space in my notebook. Angelo's nature is limned in frosty tones and an impossibly straight posture, a veritable ray of justice. But as he slips further morally, the line of his back is broken, first subtly, then violently as he becomes that rough beast who slouches over Isabella and smells her hair in a profoundly horrid scene.

When his scheme is at last revealed, Butz is physically broken, his head wrenched inhumanly low between his shoulders. All the actors file off the stage, and Jent delivers her masterstroke on the nature of mercy: Claudio approaches the wreck of Angelo, kneels before his almost-executioner and extends his hand in forgiveness, as the departing actors turn and watch in humbled silence. Compassion, the root of mercy, has never been more beautifully scribed.