

Campy drama, better known as film, returns to stage

By CHRIS PAGE
Get Out

Somewhere near the end of Nearly Naked Theatre's production of the campy musical comedy "The Rocky Horror Show," sitting in giggly stitches as Damon Dering's Dr. Frank 'N' Furter chewed the scenery on his way to a zap-gunned death in a fabulous Jackie O ensemble, it hit me: This is "Hamlet" for drag queens.

It's a challenging show that requires the stars to be in perfect alignment — the right lead, an inspired director, a competent ensemble behind him — to pull it off.

Then again, "Rocky Horror" — best known for its offspring, the cult hit midnight flick "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" — doesn't ask for respect. No production that repeatedly warns its audience members to not throw food at the cast, or whose story centers around two virginal newlyweds being taunted and seduced by a transvestite mad scientist from another planet, possibly could.

Guided by director Tim Shawver and backed by a pretty great rock ensemble, Dering and his rude mechanicals (I'm mixing my Shakespeare) have crafted a screwy gem in their downtown Phoenix production. Like Furter's makeup after his climactic meltdown, the show is not perfect. But it's a blast fueled by an inescapable aura of sheer fun.

Just as actors often adapt "Hamlet" to more modern environs, Dering defies comparison to Tim Curry — the original Furter in both the play's 1973 London premier and the 1975 film, Tim Curry, in all his black bustier and fishnetted sexiness — by dressing his more zaftig Furter in a series of fabulously flashy gowns and sequined outfits. Somehow, Dering transforms his alien tranny into a whored-up, heavyset blend of Gypsy Rose Lee, Harvey Fierstein imitating a Bob Fosse dancer, and the "Golden Girls" gals dolled up for the Royal Ascot. It's subversive and grand.

So like a drag queen, Dering cares more about the spotlight than connecting with his castmates. That's a shame, because they offer some of the show's brightest and funniest moments. Dion Johnson's dorky newlywed Brad Majors, smuggling olives in a pair of Fruit of the Looms, is hilariously pitch-perfect. And as doe-eyed wife Janet Weiss, Traci McCormick is a pneumatic wonder, scampering and adorably crooning in a bra and slip for most of the show.

Damon Bolling and Katie Williams-Ivie (Riff Raff and Magenta, respectively) show off not skivvies but their powerhouse vocal chops. Actor David Weiss — no relation to the fictional Janet, and last seen nearly naked in Nearly Naked's "Gilgamesh" — here dons a Rod Serling suit and tie to play the show's narrator; his strong Shakespearean pipes come in handy, compensating for a lack of a microphone in a show that's cluttered with noise.

This "Rocky Horror's" biggest blemish is its sound design. On opening night, Make Van Loon, the man working the mixing board, seemed to have trouble managing the cast's scattered wireless headset microphones, missing cues and endlessly fiddling with the mix. And why didn't anyone stick a mic near the show's five darling Phantoms — ensemble ghouls who provide backup harmonies — so we can hear their lovely oohs and ahhs coming from the corner of the stage?

Nearly Naked's "The Rocky Horror Show" is a gas, and this production earns so many big laughs I suspect they slipped a little nitrous oxide into the fog machine under the stage. A lesson learned from another company's recent production of a similarly campy — and drag queeny — musical, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch": Sometimes enthusiasm trumps accuracy. And enthusiasm drips from every pore of this "Rocky Horror."

I can respect that.