

Stage

King of Comedy

Bavarian cream of the crop

By Robrt L. Pela

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You don't have to know who the mad King Ludwig II is (he ruled Bavaria in the mid-19th century) to enjoy the naughty comedy of Paul Rudnick's remarkably funny *Valhalla*. You don't even need to know who Rudnick is (for my money, one of the most talented comic writers of the last half-century) or Dion Johnson (one of our best local acting talents, who's having a whale of a time playing a degenerate yokel with a heart of gold in Nearly Naked Theatre's new production of Rudnick's play).

As drawn by Rudnick, Ludwig (Tim Shawver) is a harebrained swish, a fanatical aesthete who cares not a whit for governing his homeland; his only love is the opera. His story is told in tandem with that of fictional James Avery (Johnson), a gay miscreant growing up in Texas in the late 1930s. Both spend their lives in pursuit of beauty: Ludwig's in the form of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, with which he's obsessed; James' in the form of fellow hick Henry Lee (Joseph Kremer), with whom he falls in love when they're boys and pursues throughout their lives. The stories dovetail in World War II, when the young men wind up in Bavaria on a spying mission, where they stumble on the late Ludwig's storybook castle, Valhalla, and finally consummate a romance that's lasted their lifetimes.

There are women in all these men's lives, although each of them is either underplayed or overacted by the two actresses assigned to them. As Queen Marie, Patti Davis Suarez is trying too hard to be funny, and both she and Courtney Weir, who takes the primary female ensemble roles, let some of Rudnick's best lines (like "Inner beauty is tricky, because you can't prove it") fall flat. Although he's let his actresses down, director Damon Dering should be handed a palm for creating such seamless interplay between two distinct eras, and for guiding his male cast to such sterling performances.

Shawver's King Ludwig is a sweet-natured nutbox, and his comic interplay in some of Rudnick's exchanges are letter perfect. (My favorite: A deformed princess expresses her joy at meeting Ludwig by saying, "Only this morning I was the loneliest humpback in Europe!" to which the king replies, "Was there a *contest*?") Joseph Kremer continues to impress me with the versatile characters he creates in play after play; I even believed him as a giant singing whisk in a recent production of *Beauty and the Beast*. Here he's taken Henry Lee's exasperation at and confusion over his sexuality and turned them into an appealing bewilderment that's charming where it might have been churlish and annoying. He's especially effective in scenes with Johnson's James Avery, the polar opposite of Henry Lee who, thanks to Johnson's quietly impassioned reading, is

this week in Culture



Pray for reign: The King is a nun in *Valhalla*.

Details

Who / What:


Valhalla

Details:


Continues through December 4.
Call 602-254-2151.

Where:


Phoenix Theatre's Little Theatre,
100 East McDowell Road

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A Nearly Naked profile

himself a stunning creation. If Johnson stumbles occasionally into utter hamminess, it's only fitting: James is the sort of fellow who's histrionic in his sleep.

Scenic designer T.J. Weltzien brings us both Bavaria and Texas in a mad hodgepodge of a set, all newel posts and glimmering curtains and what Mary Astor once referred to as "ruined finery." Weltzien's costumes, on the other hand, are unremarkable and look mostly like stage clothing built on a budget, although he's to be commended for creating period styles that blend effectively when, toward the end of the play, both tales and time periods converge. It's this section of the play, written with dignity and pathos but still bursting with punch lines, that's toughest to pull off, but Dering and his cast and crew give it as much meaning -- and as much entertainment value -- as every pleasurable moment that came before it.