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PLOT IS THIN BUT 'GUTENBERG' PRESSES ON

By Barbara M. Bannon | November 22, 2007

A long table sits in the center of the stage, covered with a display of trucker hats with writing on their brims: "Monk," "Beef Fat Trimmer," "Bootblack," "Rats," "Drunk" and "Dead Baby," among others. The rest of the set consists of a couple of blue storage bins with placards that announce what they are at various times: chimney, wine press, printing press, rubble.

Simplicity and silliness are the watchwords for Plan-B Theatre Company's production of "Gutenberg! The Musical!" For a theater company we usually associate with seriousness and social significance, "Gutenberg!" represents a distinct change of pace, a lighter touch for the holiday season.

The show has a double focus. First, there's the story itself. It's about Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, who lived in 15th-century Germany, an unlikely subject for a musical. Since "the details of his life and work are scant," creators Scott Brown and Anthony King can do anything they want with him, and they take full advantage of that opportunity. According to their "historical fiction," he lived in a small town named Schlimmer (where all the roofs are dirty thatch); ran a wine press before inventing the printing press ("one makes you drink, the other makes you think"); had a beautiful assistant named Helvetica who was madly in love with him ("Helvetica must have been real; a font is named after her"); and was opposed by the unscrupulous Monk, who didn't want anyone to learn to read and challenge his authority.

But the plot is just a pretext. The show is really about Doug Simon (Kirt Bateman) and Bud Davenport (Jay Perry), the two guys who supposedly wrote this musical (Brown's and King's alter egos). They are so excited about their first big break that they take us through the entire show: telling the story, singing the songs and playing all the characters, which is where the hats come in.

One of the comic highlights of this production is watching Bateman and Perry juggle those hats. They pile them on top of each other on their heads so they can change characters fast; they hold several in each hand to simulate a group talking; they even string them on a rope to form a chorus line.

The faster things move, the more fun Bateman and Perry seem to be having. They are totally into the material, and their energy and enthusiasm are contagious. That's a gift, because the material is sometimes not as funny as it thinks it is. But the production never lags, thanks to Jerry Rapier's well-paced direction and Jeffrey Price's spirited musical direction and piano accompaniment. Colleen Lewis has supplied some silly dance routines reminiscent of old Hollywood musicals, which Bateman and Perry dutifully count out. There are also audience participation and a surprise guest appearance at the end.

"Gutenberg! The Musical!" is so thin at times that it's transparent, but the good-natured zaniness of this production compensates for its limitations and makes it a welcome addition for the holidays.

BOTTOM LINE: "Gutenberg! The Musical!" is pretty silly stuff, but watching Kirt Bateman and Jay Perry celebrate its zaniness is well worth the price of admission.