

# MCT has a blast with wild French farce 'Flea in Her Ear'

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There's nothing like a naughty French farce to keep audiences paying attention and laughing raucously. That's exactly what's going on at Park Hall in Ben Lomond where Mountain Community Theater is presenting David Ives's relatively new version of Georges Feydeau's 1907 slyly seductive comedy "A Flea in Her Ear" through Oct. 23.

The single, most important requirement of a madcap adventure like "Flea" is comic timing. Happily, just about the entire cast of MCT's production is solid on this point, thanks to good casting decisions by W. Scott Whistler. Whistler also gets credit for somehow making all the inane, insane shenanigans turn out fine in the end.

This is a tale that is slow to build, and with so many characters appearing in the first 15 minutes, it takes awhile to figure out who's who. It doesn't help that two of these have (intentional) convoluted speech. The first is Camille Chandebise (Nik Beiden-Charles), who has a strange speech impediment: He's unable to pronounce consonants. That means both the audience and the other characters in the play can only understand a few of his words. The other is Don Carlos (Rich Botelho) who talks as if he has cotton in his mouth, but is supposed to be a charming (but hotheaded) mixture of Spanish and English.

Beiden-Charles is a wonder, because when the family doctor (a steely eyed Michael LaMere as Dr. Finache) provides him with an artificial palate, he switches to beautiful English. When he loses it, he immediately talks in mumbles again.

Yet this entire production would likely be much more routine were it not for the wildly charming, infinitely amusing, devilishly good Frank Widman in the dual roles of the respected businessman Victor Emmanuel Chandebise and the drunken porter Poche who works for the Frisky Puss Hotel.

As Victor, Widman is fine, if somewhat aloof. But whenever he gets into his Poche persona, he is delicious. (It doesn't hurt that he has a somewhat eerie resemblance to the late Gene Wilder in his, um, wilder moments.)

Attempting to describe the play's plotline is futile because it's so full of improbabilities and contrived coincidences that it doesn't really make sense. That's why it's best to go with the flow, do your best to keep the characters straight and enjoy all the hi-jinks.

Several other performers deserve mention for etching indelible characters in this production. Susan Forrest as Victor's wife, Raymonde, is subtly captivating, though she could at times rev up her reactions a tad. Kathie Kratochvil is a charming surprise as Lucienne (Lucy), Raymonde's best friend and wife of the jealous Spaniard Dan Carlos. In Act three she works herself up into such a frenzy in one scene that the opening-night audience last Friday reacted with delighted applause.

Supporting roles are well handled by Cassandra Stipes as Antoinette, the Chandebise cook (and resident slut); Jackson Wolffe as Ferrailon, owner of the Frisky Puss, who gives poor Poche many disdainful kicks and who frequently looks out toward the audience and declares "It's disgusting!"; Ward Willats as Rugby, the Englishman staying at the Frisky Puss who's far less proper than he first appears; and Jessica Gnau as Eugenie, a comely chambermaid at the hotel.

The three-act play which takes place in Paris demands a lot of extra effort from MCT in the set design and creation department. Act 1 is in the elegant Chandebise home featuring patterned wallpaper, antique furniture, an imposing fireplace with intricate wrought-iron screen and gold-embossed drapes. That entire set has to be broken down, taken

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Produced by: Mountain Community Theater

Directed by: W. Scott Whistler

When: Through Oct. 23

Where: Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$20 general; \$17 senior/student; youth (under 10): \$10

Details: (831) 336-4777 or [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org)

away and, in its stead, the lobby and various rooms of the Frisky Puss Hotel set up for Act 2. Act 3 is again in the Chandebise home.

This required the efforts of a set construction crew and designers including Larry Cuprys, Walter Slaven, Rob Wojtasiewicz, scenic artist Kate Longini Pratt and a number of set changers who did herculean work during the two intermissions. That, in itself, is a singular feat.

It takes a village to mount a production of this size, and MCT always seems to be able to enlist a passel of talented behind-the-scenes people. Costume designer Susan McKay, ably assisted by Abby Halper, Aaron McKay and Susan Forrest, created clothing that fit each character to a 'T.' Wyatt and Lyle Troxell worked lights effectively, and Steve Edmonds's sound design was ably operated by Wojtasiewicz.

Who knew that such an old tale would still be relevant in 2016? Even more impressive: Many of the spoken lines crackle with modern-day humor. One example: Antoinette chides her hapless husband Etienne (Dave Halper), "You're crossing the line from jealousy to stupidity."

The verdict? Fun for all (though not appropriate for youngsters).

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