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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

It's Halloween night, but the actors on stage in the Showcase Theater are not in costume. Dressed in black from head to toe, the company looks more like a gang of cat burglars than an acting troupe.

To be fair, there is a cat on stage. And a dog. And a donkey. And a rooster. The animals who form the Bremen Town Musicians in the classic children's story come to life thanks to actor Jamie Mix, who purrs and scratches as she portrays the feline member of the group.

Acting as the dog, Killian Doze growls and lunges, while donkey Franklin Guillen manages to keep a fragile peace — until Juan Carlos Contreras bursts on stage as the rooster, flamboyant and vain. It's only a rehearsal, but everyone in the theater collapses in laughter.



That's par for the course with the play "Story Theater," said director Gloria Goodwin.

"This is a very different kind of theatrical experience, and it's a form playwright Paul Sills really perfected when he created Second City, the improv group in Chicago," she said. Second City, comedy fans know, has served as a training ground for many Saturday Night Live stars and movie actors like the Belushi brothers, John Candy and Tina Fey.

In Story Theater, Sills reworked classic stories into 10 short, punchy skits. The show offers a fresh and sometimes surprising look at familiar tales like "The Golden Goose," "Henny Penny" and more.

The show is funny on many levels, Goodwin said. With elements of mime, physical comedy and improvisation, actors are encouraged to "ham it up." Props and sets are minimal, though a brightly-painted wooden cow appears in the skit "The Little Peasant."

Occasionally, the cast members address the audience, tearing down the invisible wall between the stage and the spectators.

"It really is a demanding form of acting," said Goodwin. "It demands that actors be both in character, maintaining that, but also to step away briefly to explain it to the audience. It is a challenge. You look at this show and think it's light and simple. It's anything but."

In part, that's due to the subject matter. While the fairy-tale aspect of Story Theater might seem to evoke childhood, the ideas are decidedly adult, full of trickery, hubris and death.

"When you think about the early storytellers whose fables and fairy tales are the basis for Story Theater, they aren't PG or even G-rated," Goodwin said. "A lot of work by Aesop and the Brothers Grimm has a kind of dark underside about human nature and our baser instincts. Sometimes the stories are just strange and crazy and involve animals, but they all have a lot to say about the human condition."

In doing so, Story Theater presents a challenge to its players.

“I don’t think they realized how hard this would be when they stepped into the project,” she said with a laugh. “But I worked with quite a few of these people at the high school, and knew their work ethic and their talent.” Goodwin also was lucky enough, she said, to be involved in a college production or two before taking the helm as drama instructor at SCCC, “so I’m very fortunate to have such a wonderfully collaborative group of people.”

Among them are members of other departments in the humanities division at SCCC. Instrumental music instructor Darin Workman and vocal instructor Magda Silva joined the production to provide music between the skits. Art instructors Susan Copas and Dustin Farmer “took my ideas and turned them into this beautiful scenic design,” Goodwin said.

Copas and her students crafted stair risers that look like giant books, their spines glowing with intense color on the darkened stage. A three-dimensional volume sculpted by Farmer displays the show’s title and an illuminated castle on its open “pages.”

“It’s always this great adventure to see what pulls a show together, and I’m so thrilled with all of it,” Goodwin said.

She’s equally pleased with the cast, who have brought “so much creativity and courage to the roles,” she said. “This is one of those shows that is total ensemble work. There is no star of the show, this is not a vehicle for any one actor.”

As academic theater, she noted, “one of the major goals is that those who participate are learning, growing, gaining skills that go beyond the performance itself. It’s important in the fabric of our civilization to know how to work together with other people so that you are considerate, a team-player, working for the common good and not just your own glory. In Story Theater, you put your ego aside. Overall, I think it’s been a nice growing experience.”

The show has given Goodwin an opportunity to grow as well.

“I’d had my heart set on the William Inge play, ‘Picnic,’ but we were not able to cast that show,” she said. “At first I was torn, I was disappointed, and I had to adjust. But Story Theater has always been one of my favorite shows. I’ve been in the show, I’ve produced it, and it’s different every time you do it. I’m so happy with how it’s shaping up. I no longer think of it as a second choice, but as fate.”

The SCCC drama department will continue the fairy-tale theme in the spring of 2014, when it produces the musical “Into the Woods,” which Goodwin described as “a great fairytale mashup of Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk and more.”

With a plethora of popular television shows based on fairytale stories currently on air, Goodwin said SCCC has mirrored a pop culture trend. Perhaps that is because the stories never get old.

“They have a lot to say about the human condition and what we would do for money, what our inner voice tells us, the way greed and power corrupt,” she said. “Those themes are timeless.”

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