

BACKSTAGE

November 22-28, 2007

Grand Delusion

By Jeff Favre

The assassination of Austrian archduke Ferdinand is widely considered the event that sparked what's now known as World War I. In playwright David Rock's new, imaginative, zany version of history, the egos and arrogance of a few key political figures led to the catastrophic war, when it could have been avoided with reason and patience. Rock's intelligent script—part history lesson, part Marx Brothers movie—requires a cast with strong physical-comedy skills, and director Larry Biederman has just that. Though a bit long, *Grand Delusion* offers a new take on an old subject—one that's worth revisiting.

The lone wordless character who haunts the stage is the infamous victim Ferdinand (Tim Banning). He spies on the proceedings that follow his death. Count Rumpeldorf (Timothy Omundson) of Austria tells Gen. Fafou (Eric Stonestreet) of France that Austria plans to invade Serbia in retaliation for the assassination. Of course the problem is that if Austria invades, Czar Nicholas II (Xander Berkeley) must counter with his Russian forces. Then Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II (Kurt Fuller) will come to the aid of Austria. And if Germany also invades Belgium during the struggle, the Kaiser learns from Great Britain's Duchess of Shrewsbury (Amanda Detmer) that Great Britain will attack.

And while the stakes are dangerously high, the only person involved in the talks that seems remotely sane and worried about keeping the peace is the Czar's envoy, a footman named Podnov (Brad Raider). Biederman's cast, except for Raider of course, portrays these historical characters with a heavy sense of irony and absurdity, and the result is quite funny. Fuller, in particular, provides the most laughs. Wearing a sling on his left arm (the real Kaiser had a withered arm), Fuller struts about the stage, blustering his lines and appearing to care little about the insignificant lesser people in his presence. Stonestreet's portrayal of the rotund Fafou, barking insults at Rumpeldorf, matches Fuller's in intensity. Detmer, with her brash attitude, provides a worthy foil to the men.

Biederman keeps the pace fast, but because Rock's script is repetitive, it could use a 15- to 20-minute edit to keep from losing steam in the second act. But this creative work is bound to see life beyond this premiere.

Presented by RED DOG SQUADRON at The Lost Studio, 130 S. La Brea Ave., L.A. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 4 p.m. Nov. 17-Dec. 15. (323) 960-4441. www.plays411/granddelusion.