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Play Review: Grand Delusion

How do you make world wars funny? During World War II, one of the more somber moments in world history, it took some time to find comedy in what was an absurd era that fomented the rise of Existentialism and made geniuses out of Albert Camus, Pablo Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre, none of whom made their mark in comedy.

In *Springtime for Hitler*, Mel Brooks showed us that even the most untouchable tyrants can be laughed and, as such, some of the more depressing moments in our world history at times must be approached with a comedic lens that can offer a deeper scope of understanding than a history book could.

That is the aim of David Rock, whose new play, *Grand Delusion* is on stage now at The Lost Studio on La Brea. It's a play shadowed in bifurcation that presents dark moments with a light touch and revelatory dialogue from actors who assumed their roles with the comfortability of a batting glove on a home run champ.



Kurt Fuller and Amanda Detmer

leader without a clue who played the role with a convincing duality.

Sound familiar? Rock's play may not be historically accurate. But it doesn't have to be. It's an allegory of nation building, of war, of leaders and leadership and power in the wrong hands of violent men who want to build their legacy's on the backs of forgotten soldiers and desolate country sides without knowing everything there is to know about everything that needs to be known.

"Nobody, not even The Kaiser knows what's best for The Kaiser," he says at one point when approached by a lesser power about what direction might be best for world peace.



Amanda Detmer, Timothy Omandson, Kurt Fuller and Eric Stonestreet

Red Dog Squadron presents
"GRAND DELUSION"

by David Rock

Directed by Larry Biederman

Nov. 16 - Dec. 15, 2007

at the Lost Studio Theatre

www.reddogsquadron.com (323) 960-4441

Photo by: Ed Krieger

Grand Delusion takes place in the moments before World War I, as the leaders from Russia, France, Germany and Austria met to either ward off an international battle or start a war, based on their own personal motivations.

The impenetrable star of the show, The Kaiser of Germany played by Kurt Fuller, best known for his work in *Wayne's World*, sold the audience not with his physical prowess but his ability to mindlessly act mindful of the power under which he thinks he is bestowed. Mindlessly because, well, he's totally unaware about the real issues of the balance of power between countries and the implications of war, mindful because he is aware of his awesome power and clueless because well, he's a dumbass. He was the powerful world

Grand Delusion could be considered one long skit about George Bush's foreign policy and its failed attempts to gain a stronger international foothold and consolidate power in a world half a mile away. You could think that because it would be accurate, but it would be too short sighted.

To compare it simply to Bush is to ignore that the world has been in this situation before. The British tried to conquer Iraq in the 20s and 30s, only to leave the country and partition it after failing to understand the roots of the people and their distrust of the west in 1932. The Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979 only to be driven out nine years later after well armed insurgents drove the befuddled world power out. And so on.

If nothing else, *Grand Delusion* reminds us that war is not inevitable but ignorance kills. That point was driven home by Brad Raider, who played a Russian emissary named Podnov. As the rare voice of reason amongst a crop of power driven leaders, Podnov, who played his role with a subdued air of civility, tried in vain to steer clear of war with a logical road map to peace. But he is laughed at and subordinated to the point of no return. If we continue this allegory, Podnov is Colin Powell.



Eric Stonestreet and Brad Raider

The clear, concise, yet biting tongue of Rock was sprinkled throughout the show. "There is no such thing as false truths, just false people," said Fafou, the French leader played by Eric Stonestreet.

In addition the attention to production detail reinforced the fact that just because a stage is as big as your living room and the audience might not outnumber a Sunday BBQ, the plays the thing. Music in between scenes, for example, featured Franz Ferdinand type rock, while the person changing the props in between scenes was the ghost of Franz Ferdinand himself, whose death sparked World War I. Sound Designer Colbert Davis also managed to include a little Arcade Fire as the play ended. Nothing encompasses the beauty of death and destruction like the song Intervention, which sings "You're still a soldier in your mind, though nothing's on the line"

However, on more than one occasion did Rock resort to pedantic gags and scoffable one liners to convey a sense of idiocy in some of his characters. Czar Nicholas, played by Xander Berkeley, for example, was a stupefied old man whose grasp on reality was couched in the most obvious senility.

At one point he pulls a rubber chicken out of his pants as a gag and in another he remarks, "Late Edward King of England? No, I remember him being quite punctual."

Still, Stonestreet and Fuller, as competing voices from different geo-political climates, played off each other brilliantly and each had enough stage presence to fill a battlefield. They were convincing enough to be world leaders or village idiots, a rare combination that is, unfortunately, grounded in reality.



Eric Stonestreet, Kurt Fuller, Amanda Detmer and Timothy Omundson

Not to be outdone, the beautiful Amanda Detmer, who, as the only woman of the testosterone filled pentarchy of industrialized nations, provided an elegant distraction in the face of heated stratagems. Which is not to say she played dumb as the blond bimbo. On the contrary, her persuasive eloquence, as the representative from England, was a testament to the unique role women have played in world history.

And unique is certainly a word that could describe *Grand Delusion*, whose historical message about the present teaches us that the run up to war and war itself can be as absurdly hilarious now as it was in 1914. It's that rare bit of comedy that never mentions current events yet could be ripped from every headline from Washington to Baghdad, all with wit and vigor worthy of a stage twice its size.