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THEATER REVIEW: On your Marx, get ready for plenty of puns and fun

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This ain't Groucho's "Animal Crackers," but it belongs more to the brothers Marx than the playwrights.

Director Seth Panitch's love letter to classic comedy and comedians probably would have tossed in an actual jungle-gym of kitchen plumbing, if they could have figured out a way to make actors throw funny.

No gag is too broad, goony or sly for this amalgamation, this concatenation of cacophony and paronomasia. It's the kind of swing-a-dead-cat-at-the-wall-to-see-what-shticks comedy that might require more than usual openness, an ability to wince past modern ironic barriers erected to such fine mess.

Old-school comedy is often smarter than we think. While "Animal Crackers" ramps giddily down to the kind of physical stunts even babies would delight in, it also soars to heights of verbal fluency that require an appreciation for smart twists of absurdity, concocted by minds more like corkscrews than arrows. While The Marx Brothers were considered banter masters, even the Three Stooges relied more on character and wordplay than we often remember: "Father died dancing, you know ... at the end of a rope," was a Curly line, but it could as easily have come from Groucho or Chico. Not so much Harpo, though he could have mimed the heck out of a hanging.

The 1930 film of "Animal Crackers" was based on the 1928 stage play by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Riskind, with songs by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby; that's the source of this show. Although Kaufman and Riskind tailored to the characters of Groucho, Harpo, Chico and, to a lesser extent, Zeppo, the actual show deviated more than a bit from the words on page. Kaufman, who also wrote "The Cocoanuts" and "A Night At the Opera," once stepped on stage during an "Animal Crackers" rehearsal and said "Excuse me for interrupting, but I thought for a minute I actually heard a line I wrote."

If, as Groucho once said, "Home is where you hang your head," the Marx Brothers would put their feet up on the sofa of this show, while Kaufman would sag his noggin. It veers from the script in ways designed to lovingly recall a frenzied anything-for-a-laugh style, including topical and local references: It's not enough there's a Tusks-a-loosa joke; the show needed a "Roll Tide" moment, too.

Inserted meta-fictional moments — including a film montage, set to Harpo's harp, paying homage to long-gone comedy greats, and other bits I won't spoil here — make it seem possible chaos reigns. For Marx Brothers fans, there are add-on delights not found in the film, like getting a second encore after Bruce Springsteen had already

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broken your heart with “Jungleland.”

The large cast bought into the heightened style, from giddily silly musical numbers to breathless scenes racing from room-to-room; at one point, someone bursts out (regarding the on-stage mystery) “This is a farce!” The cast stops and shrugs. Or mugs. Yep.

The Marxes are all terrific tributes, but let’s start with supporting parts, such as Rebecca Kling steering faultlessly through Margaret Dumont’s Mrs. Rittenhouse. The genius of Dumont was you never knew if she was in on the joke or completely clueless, and Kling plays it beautifully, right down the middle.

Speaking of Stooges, there are non-plot scene-break bits enacted with wild whimsy by Thaddeus Fitzpatrick, Barrett Guyton and Abby Jones; Fitzpatrick really shines as Moe, and the Costello of “Who’s On First?”

Jake Green offers a wonderfully blustery blowhard as Roscoe W. Chandler, aka Abey the Fishmonger in disguise, and Brittany Steelhammer shines in moments as Jamison, beleaguered secretary to Groucho’s Capt. Spaulding. Jessica Knight and Natalie Riegel team well as scheming dames with butler Hives, oozed with oily dexterity by Petyon Conley. Laura Ballard and Jake Green make a lovely couple of less-than-nuts lovers who would be, if this weren’t a Marx Brothers show, the heroes.

So on your Marx: Matt Lewis as Groucho rolls on undaunted by the weight of a historic figure, carrying the bulk of the verbal comedy in very able, likeable performance. Tommy Walker, as Chico’s Signore Emanuel Ravelli, does likewise, with a very funny rendition broadened and expanded for the stage. Probably the most wondrous performance comes from Caroline Schmidt as Harpo, and not just because she’s a woman playing a man; Harpo’s character, aside from leering at or chasing dames, much as a dog would chase a car, was generally childlike and almost sexless. She sticks with the shtick, but finds something of her own sympathetic kookiness to add.

Jason Vogt’s swooping Art Deco-inspired set is very pleasing to the eye, with smart use of simple changes. Tiffany M. Harris’ costumes, abetted by Tiffany Towns’ makeup and hair, complete the visual recreation of an era when people seemed, at least in Hollywood and on Broadway, to be much wittier and more stylish than we mortals could ever hope to be.

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