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### Bring In the Clowns

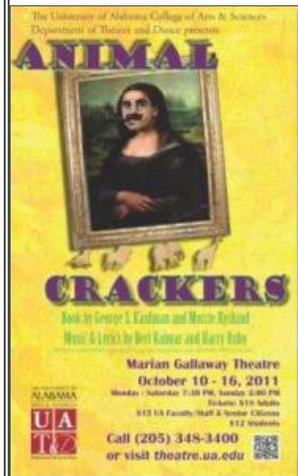
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“Hooray for Captain Spaulding, the African explorer!

Did someone call him schnorer?

Hooray, Hooray, Hooray!”

The Department of Theatre and Dance at UA has produced this highly unlikely play by the great George S. Kaufman (*You Can't Take It With You*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *Stage Door*, *The Royal Family*) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Morrie Ryskind (*Of Thee I Sing*), written as an extended series of vaudeville skits for The Marx Brothers (Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo). In many ways, it is a typical Broadway musical comedy libretto with rather dull passages involving ingénues between the stars' elaborate routines. These passages have only two purposes: to move the plot along, and to give the stars a rest between their scenes. Because of this, it is not a play that gets regular revivals, or any revivals for

that matter. It is a piece of business written specifically for the talents of its leading players, and without them, is meaningless and, presumably because of this, unproduced.

But in the expert hands of director/adaptor Seth Panitch and a crack ensemble cast of graduate and undergraduate students in the theatre program at UA and against all odds, *Animal Crackers* was produced, toyed with (much as the Marx Brothers themselves toyed with Kaufman's script), localized, and turned into a loving and frequently hilarious homage to the great comedy teams of America's past. Directed at a breakneck speed, the actors throw themselves into their roles with zest for their shopworn and silly material, producing multiple giggles, many guffaws, and the inevitable groans from the never-ending stream of puns high and low.

Beginning with Thaddeus Fitzpatrick and Barrett Guyton's superbly played cavemen routine that quickly and seamlessly segued into Abbot and Costello's "Who's on First" and later on (with the addition of the delightful Abby Jones as Larry Fine) evoked the classic "Niagara Falls!" of the Three Stooges, Panitch and his production team scoured memories, old movies and TV shows to (re)create the setting, the sounds, and the costumes of the pre-Crash Broadway. Grabbing a handful of songs connected to the Marx Brothers but not in the original play, music director Chris Thomas and choreographer Rita Snyder conveyed the charm of the period while actor-musician Jeff Horger as percussionist deftly provided the necessary rim-shot accompaniment found in virtually all vaudeville houses.

The cast is too numerous to list. All played their roles straight, yet with an appreciation of the daffiness of the set-ups. Laura Ballard and Adam Vanek were suitably ingénue-esque; Rebecca Kling's dowager managed to suggest the imperiously crinkly ghost of Margaret Dumont without devolving into an impersonation; Jake Green's art imposter/fish-monger (Abie the Fishman) provided a solid straight man to Captain Spaulding; and Peyton Conley's unctuous butler Hives was memorably skewered. Of the brothers, Brittany Steelhammer's Jamison (the Zeppo role) held her own against the surreal, Artaudian antics of Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. Matt Lewis (Captain Spaulding), Tommy Walker (Signor Ravelli) and Caroline Schmidt (The Professor) respectively inhabited the celebrated brothers without unduly trying to impersonate them, all successfully. If anyone is to be singled out, it is Ms. Schmidt's gender-bending Harpo, a brilliant piece of clowning.

Lastly, amidst all the raucous laughter, Panitch provided a stunningly poignant moment. After Walker gamely mimed the Chico piano solo, Schmidt sat down as a screen lowered from the flies and watched a film clip of Harpo's solo performance on his instrument. As the music continued to play, the screen image of Harpo was replaced with a series of images of the greatest clowns in film and television history, beginning with Laurel and Hardy, and them moving on and including Abbott and Costello, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, Lucille Ball, Buster Keaton, Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden. The barely two-minute film ended by Harpo finishing up his solo and the screen ascending into the fly space. Schmidt, holding a long-stemmed rose, laid it gently on the floor, as if leaving a flower at a grave. Thaddeus Fitzpatrick picked it up, back to the audience, and the rose was transformed into a cane as Fitzpatrick walked off in a silhouette image of Chaplin. It was magic. It was theatre.

~SDB

The University of Alabama's *Animal Crackers* runs through October 15. For more information, please visit <http://theatre.ua.edu/productions/2010-2011-season/>.

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