

# 'Caligari' casts a theatrical spell

Molly Proue, for the News-Miner

An eerie voice cackles out, “There is nothing you can know,” at the beginning of veteran director Anatoly Antohin’s “Caligari: Alaska.”

This proves a prophetic description for the story to follow. In his director’s notes, Antohin refers to Caligari as a “virtual theatre of images and ideas.” This production is based on the 1919 German expressionist silent film, “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,” a horror classic widely cited as an inspiration for later film noir and suspense movies. The original depicts the story of Caligari’s traveling carnival act and a string of mysterious murders. “Caligari: Alaska” takes its inspiration from the film and was created through an improvisational process by Antohin, a crew of student assistant directors, the actors and talented production designers.

The play opens with Caligari’s (UAF senior Sergio Santana) voice — like we are inside his head — and then we see him walking down past the audience, to the stage. He wears black and white, with an Einsteinian hairpiece topping off the ensemble, and his eyes glint with a fiendish glow. His costume is reminiscent of the black and white diagonal stripes decorating the stage. Caligari, rambling, is soon joined by three weird sisters, whose cries are first heard off stage in unison and off-pitch, and who soon make their appearances, dressed all in black. The witches keen, tilt, and titter in seeming ecstasy; although their makeup and cat-erwauling could have tipped the balance into the absurd, the actors’ commitment to their roles kept the performance on target. They delight the audience while tormenting Dr. Caligari. The lighting in this scene casts the witches’ shadows into gigantic proportions on the curtain backdrop. The trio includes Rachel Blackwell, Anna Gagne-Hawes, and Jey Johnson. Johnson was recently named UAF’s 2009 Outstanding Theatre Student of the Year, and she proves the accolades well-earned with her ravenesque portrayal of a

weird sister and her saucy gypsy.

After this, the play transitions to an audiovisual interlude. At first the image is so magnified and turbulent that it appears to be water or space, but then it pans out to reveal the shape of a body and the central nervous system. Videography is accompanied by shifts of mise-en-scene, with actors moving to the sound of a bell to strike poses on various portions of the set. The three weird sisters then morph into an international trio of gypsy narrators who address the audience directly to introduce the heart of the tale: Caligari’s (mis)adventures in a small village where townspeople are abuzz with rumors of the psychic powers of the mysterious doctor.

At Caligari’s circus show, we get our first glimpse of Cesare, Caligari’s son and a somnambulist (a fancy word for “sleepwalker”). Cesare, looking somewhat like a slimmed-down Uncle Fester, appears out of a coffin depicting a likeness of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. Cesare is controlled by Caligari, a madcap puppeteer who propels the sleeping boy toward a line of curious townsfolk. Cesare, portrayed by third-year UAF student Paul Ríos, was a highlight of the production, modestly resplendent with jerky marionette movements and somber slumbering expressions. Caligari commands the townsfolk, and an on-the-spot audience member, to ask Cesare for a prediction. One unfortunate man complies and hoarsely inquires as to when he will die. Cesare speaks up for the first time at this morbid query and tells the man he will die before the next moon. This precipitates a downward spiral into fear and violent reactions in the community, leading to disastrous conclusions. The show ends with a twist on the original surprise ending of the 1919 film.

Along with the standout performances by the witches and Cesare, there were several examples of solid ensemble work by the cast. This includes one memorable

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particularly silly, Marxist (the brothers, not the socialist) scene in which two policemen (Pedro Lizardi and Jules Nunsunginya) and the local mayor (Ramiro Rivera) exchange dialogue and props largely consisting of “hat” and “jacket” to appropriately animated music.

Perhaps no surprise in a stage play based on a silent film, this production is at its most successful in the absence of dialogue. The show features original music by Isaac Paris. You may have heard Paris and his unique musical styling around town with The Lithe or “Isaac and the Awkward Situations.” Paris’ score is at once fun and slightly eerie, creating a mystical and slightly vaudevillian backdrop for the action on the stage. The music, combined with inspired lighting and videographic selections, and well-executed choreography, allows the audience to more truly enter the dream/hallucinatory world of Dr. Caligari. Antohin’s farewell to the Salisbury stage proves a successful experiment — his vision of the fearful and fantastic Caligari is entertaining and refreshingly original.

As I was leaving the theater, I passed a small knot of perplexed audience members, one who exclaimed loudly to his companions, “Did you get that? I didn’t understand any of that.” Rather than being discouraged from seeing the show by this remark, I feel that this statement actually highlights a bonus of the show: If you tend to be slightly inattentive at theatrical productions, never fear with Caligari; it’s hard to get lost when you’re wandering through a dream-like world. If you’re looking for a traditional theatrical experience, i.e. a scripted, linear narrative, then Caligari might not be for you. If, however, you’re in the mood for a fun yet fearful comedy of horror, I would recommend the unique stagecraft of “Caligari: Alaska.”

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