

High-brows need not wrestle with 'Pestle'

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Written by
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footlights and spotlights

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Let's say you have a penchant for comedy with wildly drawn characters, silly situations, improbable outcomes and utter foolishness throughout. Let's say you're partial to actors with bottomless pools of energy, fierce comic timing and a shameless abandonment of propriety.

If so, then let's all say it together, now: "The Knight of the Burning Pestle."

What might sound like an entry in what has been called Staunton's perpetual high-brow festival is, in fact, one of the least serious pieces of nonsense ever to emerge from the Elizabethan era — that is, as director Jim Warren points out, "not written by Shakespeare."

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what: "The Knight of the Burning Pestle"

when: Playing now through June 20

where: Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton

tickets: \$10-\$40

more info: 851-1733 or www.americanshakespearecenter.com

Now playing at the Blackfriars Playhouse, "The Knight of the Burning Pestle" — which was written in 1607 by 23-year-old English playwright Francis Beaumont — mercilessly satirizes society and the theater. While its social caricatures have long since passed from the public's recognition, the play remains an energetic study in anarchic

idiocy.

The action centers on a group of actors who are about to perform a comedy titled "The London Merchant." Suddenly, a grocer (George) and his wife (Nell) step out of the audience and take to the stage to make sure their social class doesn't fare badly at the hands of the actors.

They insist that the grocer's apprentice, Rafe, be given a leading role in the play so he can represent merchants in a favorable light. Rafe then assumes the role of a not-altogether effective knight errant and calls himself the Knight of the Burning Pestle.

Rafe's shield bears the image of a mortar and pestle which, depending on how you look at it, might resemble something else altogether. The program notes claim the mortar and pestle were the emblem of the Grocer's Guild and that "anything else suggested by the pestle is now (and was then) in the eye of the beholder."

However, I've read that, in Beaumont's day, the word "pestle" was pronounced "pizzle," which corresponded with a cherished part of the male anatomy. Knowing that, you might already be able to picture the "pizzle" on Rafe's shield.

The actors in "The London Merchant" do their best to get on with the play's original story line, but the introduction of Rafe, plus constant interruptions by George and Nell, force the troupe to improvise. Soon, Rafe's adventures become a separate play within the play, while George and Nell add yet another layer to the action.

The intricacies involved in presenting these interweaving stories will leave some audience members confused as to exactly what's going on. **But so what? With Curt Foy and Ginna Hoben giving delightful performances as George and Nell, and Rick Blunt hilariously embodying an apprentice grocer's vision of a swashbuckler, who cares precisely which play is which, or who's doing exactly what?** It's fun, and it's goofy and that's all anyone can ask of a 403-year-old comedic romp on Red Bull.

Also doing the theatrical honors are James Patrick Nelson, Aidan O'Reilly, Joseph Rende, David Zimmerman, Josh Carpenter, Dennis Henry, Kelley McKinnon and Brandi Rhome.

E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at mail@stauntonhistory.com.

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