

Pig Out on *Animal Farm*

New stage treatment of classic Orwell a success

Everyone I've talked to claims to have learned about Stalin's particular brand of communism by reading George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in high school. It's a good, gentle introduction to the study of social injustice and political oppression. The beginning is a perfect children's tale: a group of cuddly, lovable barnyard animals stand up for themselves and fight against the mean farmers that mistreat them—and they win! Go animals! Then the story morphs into an unsettling satire on Stalinism, where the pigs take control and use propaganda and violence to establish themselves as dictators over the others. This portrayal is quite a shock for those of us still used to the wholesome fairytale quality of animals in our stories. It's no wonder we all remember studying the novel.

But how the heck do you take a story that involves a plethora of animals (including several pigs, horses, geese, ducks, a cat, birds, puppies and sheep) and very few humans and turn it into a play? Well, first you get Ian Ferguson, co-author of *How to be a Canadian* and a very funny man, to write a stage adaptation and direct the play. Then you apply puppets. Lots and lots of puppets.

Ferguson has taken this complicated setting and reduced it to its most simplified form. A stage full (and I do mean full) of

BARBARA PEDRICK PHOTOGRAPHY



Leslie Bland (left), Kirsten Van Ritzen and John Emmet Tracy play man and beast in *Animal Farm*

large foam animals are brought to life by three relentlessly energetic actors. Kaleidoscope Theatre's artistic director Leslie D. Bland (in a rare stage appearance), Kirsten Van Ritzen and John Emmet Tracy take turns narrating while the others run about the

stage, using the puppets to act out the scene. They each also play one of the lead revolutionists, wearing a simple pig headpiece as their only costume. All of the character transformations take place on stage; when they're done with an animal, they chuck it on the ground or hang it on the wall and move on to the next.

The result is truly a whirlwind of activity. It's like watching three ADD philosophy students discussing the novel. The actors continually break the fourth wall, talking to the audience and commenting to each other about how the play is going or how they feel about the story. Fast-paced and funny, it switches from overly silly to moving to downright disturbing as fast as you can drop-kick a plush goat across the stage.

Watching *Animal Farm* is a rare opportunity to see three inspiring performances in a unique adaptation of Orwell's classic. Come for the puppets. Stay for the revolution. And, I can say with the absolute authority of someone who has very little exposure to children, *Animal Farm* is totally appropriate for kids*. (*Author takes no responsibility for any psychological trauma that may ensue.)

—Sarah Gignac

Animal Farm

To June 1

The Belfry Studio, 1290

Gladstone

Tickets \$19-\$21 • 385-6815