Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess: The New Colony Premiere

by Chicago News Desk

Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess: New Colony Premiere

by Patrick Paddock

With the title of Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess it becomes hard to imagine an audience without even a little bit of suspicion. The title alone with its irreverent reference to one of the most iconic proto-feminist figures of the 20th century is enough to scare a few people off. Those theatergoers who do decide to take the plunge will undoubtedly walk in expecting an airy comedy. That being said, they are in for a pleasant surprise.

This debut production of The New Colony, a new company dedicated to producing seasons of world premieres, pulls the classic bait and switch, but in a good way. While retaining all of the hilarity that the title suggests, Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess also takes on the tough ideas of feminism coupled with turn-of-the-century politics.

The play delves deeply into the familiar idea of the “corporate jungle.” Part commentary and part satire, it exposes how savage business can be and how one can make a business out of savagery. The story unfolds an alternative history where an expedition (more of a publicity stunt than a mission) actually finds the legendary pilot living as a semi-amnesiatic jungle woman. The show shifts between wild jungle scenes and the world of high-tension business and politics. Remarkably, while sustaining these ideas, the show also goes further to explore the two sides of the Earhart mythos; as daring pioneer and divisive feminist icon.

After the philosophical weight inherent in the themes, the presentation of the show itself becomes a puzzle. Relying primarily on costume changes to set the scene, the audience is left with the task of trying to make sense of it all. As the line between civil and savage blurs throughout the performance, it becomes increasingly challenging and rewarding to puzzle through things. Between these scenes though, the transitions were at times overly rough. On more than one occasion the audience becomes distracted by actors creeping onto the stage and in the process, causing them to miss out on some of the most dynamic moments.

The actors themselves were terrific. There were times however, when the audience had to strain to hear their lines, and some of the characters seemed strained. Despite these things, the actors were able to put on a rather convincing image of the world this production sought to create.
The humor of this show relies heavily on skillfully delivered one-liners which, while guaranteed to deliver laughs, also leaves the audience desiring a bit more. It seemed as though too many of the already small cast were relying on awkwardness as a source of humor, dulling the effect throughout the show. Still, the performers were compelling enough to make the jokes work and deliver the laughs throughout.

The abrupt ending of this performance needs to be flushed out. This is a performance that asks a lot of the audience. Throughout the play the audience is made to juggle contrasting images and to make sense of it all. Just as the audience feels they have a grasp on it all, it is pulled out from under them in a “gotcha” type moment. Before the audience can fully process this, the house lights are up and The cast is taking its bow. This is the one occasion in which the show asks too much of the audience.

The show was written and workshopped with the ensemble of actors, playwright and director. The ideas were inspired by the playwright, James Asmus, and fleshed out by the actors. This collaborative effort adds a refreshing touch to the experience.

Andrew Hobgood, director and co-founder of The New Colony spoke of the company’s mission to “create new theater that would matter to American audiences, as well as attract new, typically non-theater-going audiences.” The first part of this mission was a great success, provoking the audience to examine the pressing issues of gender and power while not being too heavy handed. In terms of attracting a less than typical theater audience, however, there is some serious work to be done. The performance relied on humor to make it accessible. This worked to a point but overall the amount of effort required on the part of the audience, coupled with the surprise ending, made the show seem just a touch out of reach.

Overall, *Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess* proves to be an all around good time. The laughs are plentiful and the ideas are thought provoking. As the first performance by a brand new company, this play makes a stellar debut and the opening of what should be a promising season of original plays.

*Amelia Earhart Jungle Princess* runs Thursdays through Saturdays at 8:00PM and Sundays at 7:00PM at the National Pastime Theater at 4139 N Broadway St. Show Passes are $28. Industry/student passes are $15. Passes are on sale at [www.thenewcolony.org](http://www.thenewcolony.org) or by calling 800.838.3006. All passes to New Colony productions allow the purchaser to see the show for which the pass was purchased an unlimited number of times.