

Wildside Festival uncovers the unique Poutine Masala

BY PAT DONNELLY, GAZETTE THEATRE CRITIC JANUARY 8, 2013



Deepali Lindblom (left) and Hashim Javed play in Poutine Masala, an intercultural love story about a South Asian dance teacher who falls in love with a Quebec francophone actor.

Photograph by: Victoria Laberge



Centaur Theatre's Wildside Festival has gone populist with two lighthearted musicals (Poutine Masala and Nothing Never Happens in Norway) and two loopy clown shows (A Day in the Life of Miss Hiccup and Placebo).

Having seen five out of this year's six Wildside shows since last Thursday, I must admit that I only fantasized escape from one of them (Two Short Women).

With a fringe festival like this, the normal maximum duration is 60 minutes. Any play that (a) takes itself too seriously and (b) lasts 90 minutes, has an uphill climb.

One exception to the rule is a spirited dance musical like *Poutine Masala*, a remount from last season which has become the clear hit of this festival. This intercultural love story about a South Asian dance teacher who falls in love with a Quebec francophone actor is the first trilingual Quebec-Bollywood musical ever.

Besides being unique, *Poutine Masala* features a charismatic female romantic lead (Deepali Lindblom, as Saudamini), who is an impressive dancer, plus a charming male romantic lead (José Dufour, as Gabriel). There's a playful dance chemistry between them. Also, the actors who play the South Asian parents, Ranjana Jha, as the mother, and Mino Gundevia, as the father, are both very much in their comedic element here.

Anyone who has ever seen a Bollywood movie will recognize the format, with a dash of Broadway added. (When the two lovers consult their friends, it's an echo from *Grease*.)

Lindblom, who recently performed a dance-theatre piece called *Satrangi* at Bain St. Michel, takes choreographic and concept credit for *Poutine Masala*. The script is by Stéfán Cedilot. Olivier Berthiaume directed and designed the set (largely props held by dancers impersonating furniture). And Mathieu Baudet takes credit for the music — in the deejay sense, we assume, as the Slumdog Millionaire song *Jai Ho* is easy to recognize.

What *Poutine Masala* needs now is a producer who recognizes its potential and knows how to upgrade to tour-ready. Some of the supporting players don't project well, their dance abilities vary, and the balance of French/English/Hindi would need to be adjusted to specific audiences.

Joe de Paul's solo clown show, *Placebo*, has huge potential, too. While this former Cirque du Soleil clown (and actor) has already performed this medical waiting-room comedy in Europe, he's still adjusting it to audiences here. De Paul is a gifted physical performer, a master of the pratfall and double-take. His reception desk character is an unassuming bungler, obedient, yet rebellious in his own way.

Placebo begins as an uneventful waiting game. When De Paul calls on a member of the audience to become the first patient of the day, the comedic stakes are raised.

While his clowning isn't quite as sophisticated as that of Yanomi in *A Day of the Life of Miss Hiccup*, anyone who appreciates the genre will want to see both family-fare shows.

In *Two Short Women*, two gal pals (Debra Kirshenbaum and Laura Mitchell) take a trip to a tropical paradise. Eventually, the partying gets out of hand and they find themselves locked in a basement, bound to chairs, victims of a smooth-talking waiter who moonlights as a revolutionary/kidnapper (Ola Wallinder).

Playwright Ann Lambert has directed her own piece, which probably accounts for the lack of astute editing. Kirshenbaum and Mitchell are both funny women who demonstrate an engaging rapport during the set-up scenes. But by the time their endless beachside chatter shifts gears into desperation, we're no longer ready to buy into this vaguely defined scenario.

The final play of the festival, *Life Here After*, by Alexandria Haber, directed by Micheline Chevrier, doesn't open until Friday and only has three performances. It's being billed as a work-in-progress production — normally a warning sign. But the cast, which includes Chip Chuipka, Lucinda Davis, Alain Goulem and Leni Parker, is stellar. So the gamble may be worth it.

The Wildside Festival continues at Centaur Theatre through Sunday. *Placebo* plays Wednesday at 9 p.m., Thursday 7 p.m., Saturday 1 p.m. *Two Short Women* plays Tuesday at 9 p.m., Friday at 7 p.m., Sunday at 1 p.m. *Life Here After* plays Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 7:30 p.m. *Poutine Masala* plays Friday at 9 p.m., Saturday at 3 p.m. and Sunday at 7 p.m. Tickets to all shows are \$15, or \$12.50 for student, subscriber, senior and under 30. Four-show superpass is \$50, \$40 reduced. Call 514-288-3161 or visit www.centaurtheatre.com

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