

Martin Denton · March 17, 2007

Men of Steel, the newest action play from Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, is in many ways the most ambitious work yet from this young and interesting troupe. It tells the stories of five different super heroes, and eventually has all of them cross paths in a scary high-security prison where some will triumph and some will be defeated.

Two of the heroes we've met before, in Vampire Cowboy Trilogy: Captain Justice and his sexy sidekick Liberty Lady. Their exciting capture by, and then defeat of, the vicious villain Hooded Menace, is one of the three sections of Trilogy and is summarized here, rather hilariously, in a "lego movie" that serves as a transition between two of the scenes of this show.

Men of Steel tells us the back story of all three of these characters, along with another "hero," Maelstrom, and Captain Justice's wife, Helen. It strikes me as a major gamble to give so much away about the real/secret identities of these larger-than-life figures, but playwright Qui Nguyen frequently makes it pay off as he probes, Batman-like, the early lives of his characters.

So we meet Jason Price as a gawky high schooler, and his pal Malcolm, and the bullying Andy, and learn something about how these three turned into Captain Justice, Maelstrom, and the Hooded Menace. (The hint of a gay relationship between Andy and Malcolm proves to be a red herring, however, although it might have explained a lot had it been taken farther.)

We also meet the other men who will figure in the climactic encounter between these three at the play's end. There's Damon and Lukas, a pair of Hispanic goof-offs from Brooklyn who fancy themselves to be crime fighters, only to discover that Damon actually seems to have some sort of special power. And there's Bryant, a badly damaged young man who literally cannot be hurt; he supports himself as a professional punching bag, renting himself out by the hour in a perverse twist on prostitution. Bryant's story is at once the most potentially intriguing and the most underdeveloped here, and though he has a special power, he never really functions as a super hero, which is kind of disappointing.

Men of Steel fizzles out in its second half, following a very strong and funny start. Nguyen and his collaborator, director Robert Ross Parker, seem to be trying to do two very different things here: half the time, the play offers the same sort of broad, muscular spoof that characterizes Trilogy and other VC works; but the other half of the time, it's very serious in probing the psychology of its characters and the reasons why they and the world around them need super heroes in the first place. It's interesting stuff, but it feels too heavy for the overall framework that's provided.

I was also disappointed that Nguyen is not Men of Steel's fight choreographer. Instead, Marius Hanford has that job, and while he delivers action scenes that are commendably well-designed and executed, his style is palpably different from Nguyen's—the fights here have a gymnastics/wrestling feel that is heavier and less elegant than Nguyen's martial-arts-based approach.

The eight-person ensemble is excellent, though (and in fact it defies credibility sometimes that there are in fact only eight of them, so frequently and seamlessly do they take on multiple roles). Jason Leibman is terrific as Jason/Captain Justice, and **Melissa Paladino and Sharon Eisman both do fine work as, respectively, Liberty Lady and Justice's wife (among others in both cases)**. Paco Tolson gets the scene-stealing role of the hilariously inept villain The Mole, and he makes the most of it. Noshir Dalal, Tom Myers, Jeremy Sarver, and Tamar Underwood complete the cast.

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