

Fanciful tale kick-starts the imagination

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Rochester, N.Y. - Donald Margulies' whimsical "Shipwrecked! An Entertainment: The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (As Told By Himself)" only recently became available for regional theaters — and Blackfriars Theatre jumped on it.

The play, at core, is Louis telling his life story: A tale of dramatic shipwreck. A tale of attacks by giant sea critters. A tale of marriage to an Aboriginal woman. A tale that may, or may not be ... all that true. But that makes a compelling story nonetheless.

One in which Janine Mercandetti and Jason Mincer both play at least a dozen characters — different genders, different backgrounds, different accents and dialects — as Louis's memories morph and tumble over one another in the telling. Sometimes they'll switch character in the middle of a scene. Sometimes they'll switch character in the middle of a line.

"It's a big stretch, a challenge, which is what's so appealing about it," Mercandetti said. "In many ways, it's a dream challenge; you get to stretch and take on things that you wouldn't have."

The play is essentially a celebration of the imagination. Everybody's memories are, after all, to a certain degree a creative construction; and this play's narrator is no exception. As Louis (Frederick Nuernberg) recounts his fanciful tale, the other actors — Mercandetti and Mincer, plus David and Jackie Spiro visibly doing sound effects — take on the assorted personae of his stories, switching back and forth, sometimes on a dime. While there's some costuming, the actors carry off the changes largely through bearing, tone, posture and the like. It's not unlike how our memories are fluid, with events, faces and situations often morphing to form what becomes our stories.

"The pure theatricality of the piece" interested director Jack Haldoupis in "Shipwrecked!"

"It celebrates things that can only work in the live theater," Haldoupis said. It wouldn't be the same in a special-effects-laden movie, for instance — this play, he said, needs to be seen in an intimate, darkened theater, where the actors are assisted in their creation of Louis's memoir by the audience, who engage their imagination to believe that, say, Mercandetti is a salty male sea captain. (That role could have gone to Mincer instead, Haldoupis noted — but what would be the fun in that?)

Citing an essay Margulies had written about the play, Haldoupis noted, "It was kind of in defiance of all the big, mega-stage productions — kind of gets back to the essentials of people using their imaginations."

Mercandetti concurred. "As a society today we are spoon-fed images, we are spoon-fed what we're supposed to see when we go to the theater — this brings us back to the time when you had to use your imagination to explore the world."

There's another undercurrent to the play: how people react to celebrity, and feel the need to build up — and to tear down. Louis de Rougemont was an actual person, a would-be explorer who indeed spun fanciful yarns about his alleged adventures for a British magazine who indeed spun a fanciful yarn about his life. He had something of a following until he was exposed as a liar.

"It's really a piece about what is real, or what is truth — and what is reality in the theater," Haldoupis said. "... It's just a very fascinating study of one man's take on memory and perception and what is real and what is theatrical.

"The show itself is so wacky — it's like Gilligan's Island meets King Lear!" he added. "There's some silliness to it, but at the same time there are some serious aspects and some speeches that are almost Shakespearean in their structure."

Coming up

Mercandetti and Mincer are teaming up to create a Valentine's Day musical revue to help defray the costs of building its new East Main Street theater. "Why I Love You," Feb. 14 at the theater, will feature musical-theater songs from shows such as "Chess" and "Songs For A New World."