

Lumping in Fargo, book/lyrics by Bryan
Reynolds, music by Michael Hooker

Kent R. Lehnhof, Chapman University

Studio Theater, University of California, Irvine. June 5-7, 2008. *Book/lyrics*, Bryan Reynolds. *Music*, Michael Hooker. *Director*, Christopher Marshall. *Choreographer*, Lisa Naugle. *Musical director*, Gary Busby. *Stage manager*, Kevin Kreczko. *Lighting designer*, Lonnie Alcaraz. *Sound designer*, Michael Hooker. *Scenic designer*, Josh Steadman. *Costume designer*, Christa Mathis. Preview at UCI as part of the Los Angeles Festival of New American Musicals prior to traveling to Gdansk, Poland for the 12th International Shakespeare Festival.

Abstract

Collaging *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and several other Shakespeare plays, *Lumping in Fargo* tells the story of a wealthy misanthrope who falls in love with a singing furniture mover. Just as romance is beginning to blossom, accusations of incest jeopardize the couple's happiness. Drawing upon Shakespearean dialogue (approximately 75% of the script is taken in patchwork form from Shakespeare) as well as Shakespearean devices (ghosts, handkerchiefs, ring plots, and ill-fated, interest-free bonds), Reynolds creates an intense and irreverent musical that is rewarding on a number of levels.

Lumping in Fargo is the latest production of the Transversal Theater Company, a group that has performed several plays written by co-founder Bryan Reynolds. For *Lumping in Fargo*, Reynolds draws upon his expertise as a scholar of early modern drama to turn out what is being billed as "a Shakespearean rock opera about an unorthodox romance in the all-too-normal world of Fargo, North Dakota" (website of the Festival of New American Musicals). By borrowing lines and lyrics from no fewer than twelve different plays, Reynolds manhandles Shakespeare's texts, making them tell his own tale. The language, which is instantly recognizable, lays out a story that is not. *Lumping in Fargo* offers several surprises, reversals, and revelations as it follows two parallel plots. One focuses on the improbable love affair between Leopold Wallersheim, a cynical multi-millionaire (played by Martin Swoverland), and Cathy Lynn Bommerbasch, a quirky furniture mover, or "lumper" (played by Sarah Moreau). The other treats the angsty tragedy of Jerry Lee Heilman, a melancholy widower (played by Daryn Mack), and his two teenage daughters, Betty Sue and Linda Lue (played by Stephanie Philo and Jennifer Schoch).

The production starts off, in the manner of *The Tempest*, with a menacing storm. Thunderclaps cue the opening number, a duet sung by Leopold, the sober-suited misanthrope, and Elvira, a frisky young thing wearing a black negligee, fishnet stockings, and a dog collar. Warbling — to Michael Hooker's infectious music — Amiens's song from *As You Like It*, Elvira invites Leopold to turn away from the storm and join her "under the greenwood tree." Leopold, on the other hand, resists her blandishments by singing Lear's lines on the heath, angrily urging the winds to "rumble thy bellyful." Although the lines are familiar, little else is. The convergence of storms (Prospero's with Lear's), the conflation of comedy and tragedy (*As You Like It* interlaced with *Lear*), and the unorthodox delivery of canonical lines (a musical *Lear*?) produce a degree of dizziness. This dizziness becomes downright vertiginous as we realize that the lingerie-clad Elvira is actually Leopold's poodle, a seductive pet that not only speaks, sings, and dances, but also ends up urinating on a few expensive antiques.

The next scene introduces Jerry Lee Heilman (played by Daryn Mack), a widower who starts awake, crying "Who's there?" and calling after an elusive apparition that resembles his dead wife. After reenacting a hodge-podge of material from the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, Jerry Lee jumps into *The Tempest*, calling for his daughter, carefully laying aside his magic cap (in which resides the lumper's art of "fitting large things into small places"), and rehearsing for her the story of how they came to live in the close, little cell that is their current apartment. This narration, though, does not feature usurping brothers. Instead, it strings together lines belonging to Hamlet, Old Hamlet,

and *Macbeth* — as well as lines of original dialogue written in the style of Shakespeare — to tell a story of catastrophe, loss, and guilt.

And so it goes.

The ingenuity of it all is impressive. Reynolds clearly knows his Shakespeare inside and out — and he clearly likes turning the inside part out, mashing together disparate plays, plots, characters, and manners. A recurrent device is to have one character speak in Elizabethan English ("Wilt thou?"), only to have the other respond in exaggerated Fargo ("Oh, yah betcha!"). The drama exults in its irreverent appropriations. And it's an apt maneuver for Reynolds, who was identified by the University of Alabama's Hudson Strode Program in 2004 as "one of the six most brilliant Renaissance scholars in the world under 40." What else would one expect of an *enfant terrible* but an Oedipal struggle with Shakespeare, an aggressive rewriting of the Bard?

For the most part, there's fun to be had in watching Reynolds mess with Shakespeare. He presses a bit with some of his allusions, but it's enjoyable to identify them and assess the irony of their redeployment, if for no other reason than to congratulate one's self on one's literary sophistication. During the show's early scenes, it's delightful merely to catch the reference, get the joke, and be in on it all. This rather pretentious form of pleasure, however, ultimately gives way to something greater, for *Fargo* goes beyond its gimmick. Before all is over and done with, the musical pastiche generates light as well as heat.

At times, *Lumping in Fargo* aims at the quick and easy pleasure of violation — the pleasure of wresting Shakespeare's words into something anachronistic or outrageous — but it is astonishing to see how seamlessly Reynolds and Hooker translocate so many of Shakespeare's speeches, not merely into a modern social context but into a completely different genre, state of mind, and emotional register. Romeo's sentiments upon first meeting Juliet would seem to depend upon youthful passion and breathless innocence, but they work remarkably well when sung by a jaded, middle-aged man — with a banjo accompaniment, no less! It sounds slightly absurd, but it succeeds, testifying to what would appear to be an essential, undying power in Shakespeare's language.

While *Lumping in Fargo* capitalizes on this power, its relationship to Shakespeare is not simply parasitic. The musical takes, but it also gives. When Jerry Lee, for instance, deliberates on whether "to be or not to be" following his conviction for child molestation, his soliloquy invests the famous lines from *Hamlet* with especial intensity, for the distressing consideration of what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil — a consideration that remains rather abstract

in *Hamlet* — is quite concrete in *Fargo*. We have witnessed Jerry Lee's guilt-ridden nightmares and know precisely what he has to fear, should dreams attend the sleep of death. The cumulative effect of *Fargo's* endless sampling is to show — if anyone needed showing — that we have not tapped out Shakespeare's texts. Shakespeare's meaning (perhaps all meaning) is forever in excess of its interpretation or enactment. The play's more penetrating insights, however, have to do with questions of character and identity, for at the same time the lumpers in *Fargo* are relocating and rearranging property, *Lumping in Fargo* is relocating and rearranging personhood.

Fargo assails certain notions of identity by ostentatiously lumping together characters and roles that are supposed to be individual and discrete, even diametric. This lumping occurs at several levels. On one level, each actor in *Fargo* (with the exception of Daryn Mack) is cast in multiple roles. The actor who plays Jerry Lee's oldest daughter, Linda Lue, also plays the chirpy interior decorator, Verna Mary. The actor who plays Cathy Lynn, the lovely singing lumper, also plays Lehmann, the defense attorney. But it does not stop here, because all of the characters we encounter in *Fargo* are themselves composites of other characters: Shakespearean ones. Leopold Wattersheim is not only Lear and Romeo, but also Portia and the Gravedigger. Jerry Lee takes turns at being Hamlet and Old Hamlet, as well as Feste and Lear, as well as Macbeth and Prospero. The musical's staging of character is thus quite complex. Each actor in the production constantly switches back and forth between multiple Fargoan personae, who are themselves constantly switching back and forth between multiple Shakespearean personae.

For all this fluidity, the musical still functions. Character still emerges. (Indeed, the most unsatisfying moment in the production takes place near the end, when Verna Mary performs an action that seems out of character.) In this manner, *Fargo* indicates that identity is less an origination (the founding of a unique, unshared essence) or a discovery (the paring away of the imposed to find the authentic) than it is an accretion (the continual layering of pre-existing and pre-determined roles). The observation that selfhood is not unique, the position that subjectivity is constrained within the system that precedes it and from which it can never be free, might appear to deny the possibility of novelty or change. But *Lumping in Fargo* offers evidence to the contrary. The musical's recombinatorial virtuosity demonstrates that meanings and identities are not fixed in place by the social scripts that pre-exist them. We may not be able to escape the cultural codes that dictate our actions and compose our identities, but we can recombine them. Just as Reynolds reorders the Shakespearean script to bring into being an alternate reality, each of us can reorder the social script to do the same.

But lest we take all this too seriously, there's the epilogue. Stephanie Philo, playing the part of a poodlish Puck, steps forward and proposes, "If we shadows have offended . . ." After pausing with a wry smile for the audience to place the allusion and chuckle appreciatively, Elvira runs through the rest of the speech, concluding with one final, profane appropriation:

Give us your applause, if we be friends,

If not, fuck you!

Even without the obscene invitation, I was prepared to applaud. *Lumping in Fargo* is clever, sophisticated, and provocative. And the Transversal Theater Company, under the direction of Christopher Marshall, makes the most of the material.

Online Resources

Website for the Los Angeles Festival of New American Musicals. <http://www.lafestival.org>.

Information about the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdansk, Poland. <http://www.gdansk-life.com/poland/shakespeare-festival>.

Website (in Polish) for the International Shakespeare Festival. http://www.teatr-szekspir.gda.pl/article/miedzynarodowy_festiwal_szekspirowski/.

Website for Bryan Reynolds and The Transversal Theater Company. <http://www.bryanreynolds.com/>.

Information about the plays of Bryan Reynolds on Doollee.com. <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsR/reynolds-bryan.html>.

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