

Animal Instincts

Theater review: *The Moreau Horrors*

By KEENAN WALSH

It's a fact: As frigid air arrives, we northerners find ourselves daydreaming of lush climates. Well, it's not a *proven* fact, but we all do it, don't we? Adding a new layer to our fantasies with each minute lost to shortening days, with visions of sandy beaches and tropical foliage dancing in our heads? Or perhaps of some human-animal hybrids vivisected by a mad scientist in exile.

OK, that daydream just became a nightmare. But, as depicted in Burlington playwright Seth Jarvis' new work, *The Moreau Horrors*, a nightmare can provide a fun break from reality — even if it is sometimes silly and sexually preoccupied.

The new musical play — staged by the Saints & Poets Production Company — is Jarvis' loose adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1896 sci-fi novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (adapted to film in 1932, 1977 and 1996). Wells himself described the story as “an exercise in youthful blasphemy” in the preface to the 1933 edition. “Blasphemous” might be an appropriate adjective for this play as well — though today we're more likely to use words such as “edgy” and “irreverent.”

Most of the story takes place on a small, unnamed island, “beyond the map” — a distinctly otherworldly domain. A naïve recent college grad and would-be scientist named Prendick, played here with Hardy Boys-style earnest enthusiasm by Matt Parisi, has been picked up in the ocean after a shipwreck. He wakes to find himself in the cabin of another ship, under the care of the über-macho Montgomery (who is described by his half-dog servant as a “drinker but not a drunk” and insists the difference is crucial). When Prendick, ill at ease on the eerie new vessel, asks where he is, Montgomery (Jordan Gullikson) explains that they are in “uncharted waters,” and hints that Prendick (whom he and the other characters repeatedly call “Pendrick”) might have been better off left to drown at sea.

When they arrive on the island, Prendick is brought to a cellar, where he is intrigued to hear his captors talk of Moreau (Patrick Clow), a scientist ostensibly conducting research there. Prendick resolves to learn more about Moreau's mysterious work and to have a look around this odd place. Montgomery promptly drugs him (taking a bit himself). In his dream state — depicted in beautiful shadow puppetry, a

specialty of Saints and Poets — Prendick recalls what he has heard about Moreau: He was a mad scientist, banished from London for conducting gruesome vivisections.

Prendick wakes up and meets the scientist himself, at which point things begin to take a turn toward the promised horror, as well as toward violence, love, sex and maniacal laughter.

Prendick's first venture into the island's depths reveals the beauty of the malleable set designed by S&P cofounder Kevin Christopher. One smooth turn of the three-sided backdrop elements transforms the cellar into a tropical forest. There ensues a convincing and entertaining stage jungle: Three black-costumed actors appear with leaves on their arms and repeatedly move in front of Prendick, making strange jungle noises as he roams deeper into the wild. When they grab at him, he tries to keep calm, but, alas, the jungle is just too creepy, and he promptly loses his cool.

Of course, Prendick's cool was never too convincing in the first place. Parisi's portrayal of his character is sometimes awkward, his delivery a bit too self-conscious. Or is it intentionally campy? To be fair, his performance recalls the character of Brad Majors in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* — one of several similarities between the two productions. In that sense, Parisi's forced demeanor fits. But it contrasts with those of the actors who play Montgomery and Moreau: Gullikson and Clow both maintain a remarkably composed and dominant presence on stage, even if the latter is sometimes, yes, deliciously maniacal.

Montgomery/Gullikson in particular commands the audience's attention — perhaps in part because of the alarmingly large “stuffing” inside his white pants. But, more than that, his character is mysterious and multilayered. Gullikson manages to hint at softheartedness beneath his callous exterior, bringing depth to a man in a sea of one-dimensional characters.

Also in the vein of *Rocky Horror* is the over-the-top, albeit mostly catchy, music, written by Adam Cooper Wood (who plays keyboard and prerecorded some backing tracks) and Nathan Jarvis (who also performs ably and nimbly as the monkey manservant). Half the time, the music energizes the show, played sensitively by a live ensemble and sung with gusto by the cast. Unfortunately, some of the melodies are repetitive, the lyrics uninteresting. The reliance on repetition (apparently for poetic value) renders some of the songs bland and rhythmically redundant. The notable exceptions are “Half Human, Half Animal, All Yours,” a sweet duet crooned by Parisi and Cael Barkman (Puma Girl); “I Am the Her,” delivered with sultry cool by Amanda Gustafson as a pregnant, defiant Her character; and “(Un)natural Selection,” belted out by Syndi Zook, whose über-matriarchal character is one of the funniest — and perhaps raunchiest — in the show.

The script of *Moreau* is quite witty, if rather lopsided between acts. Act I is fleshed out with voice-overs and plenty of dialogue, with many memorable one-liners (“Excuse me, I have an obstinate seaman to straighten out”). All of Moreau’s bizarre hybrid creatures get a turn to introduce their quirky animal characteristics and flaunt outlandish costumes, designed by Catherine Alston. Plus, Prendick discovers — and falls for — the cat-woman Puma, whom Barkman plays with feline sexiness. The rest of the plot more or less hangs on Prendick’s quest to rescue Puma from Moreau’s wicked domination.

In Act II, music monopolizes. It’s almost as if, halfway through, Jarvis tired of writing dialogue. Regardless, the tension is heightened and resolved — simplistically but entertainingly. Jarvis deserves credit for translating B-movie material to a small stage with absolute confidence and only a charming amount of self-consciousness. That alone is a feat, and the show has many wonderful moments.

One caveat, though: While sexual innuendo is usually a welcome addition to a spoof horror story, *The Moreau Horrors* seems rather *too* preoccupied with gettin’ it on; the wordplay, costumes and choreography are all drenched in sexuality. The first few jokes and accidental-walk-in-on moments are funny, even necessary for the plot. But as the show progresses, so does the reliance on sex, amplified by the titillating appearance of nipple pasties. Once sly, the references become less humorous and more distracting. Still, the second act’s musical montage — a Broadway-style, song-and-dance grand finale — is quite a spectacle.

As a theatrical production, *The Moreau Horrors* is an ambitious undertaking by a talented crew of writers, musicians, actors and designers. While imperfect, it’s still a rewarding two-hour break from reality, including the manufactured merriment of the holiday season. And, in the end, this nightmare doesn’t require a lot of postdream analysis.

"The Moreau Horrors," written and directed by Seth Jarvis, produced by the Saints & Poets Production Company. Thursday through Saturday, December 6 to 8, 7:30 p.m.; plus 2 p.m. on Saturday, December 8, at Black Box Theater, Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center, Burlington. \$20.