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Sexy Puppets Give New Life to a Cult Classic

By Elisabeth Crean
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“If They Mated” was a sketch on “Late Night with Conan O’Brien.” The formula: Take two mismatched celebrities, such as Courtney Love and John Boehner, and preview their potential progeny via Photoshop. The pic of the offspring always proved both disturbing and hilarious.

Vermont’s new **Saints and Poets Production Company** pairs two unlikely theatrical partners for its debut creation, ***The Rocky Horror (Puppet) Show***, currently at Burlington’s **Black Box Theater**. Mating a campy, sex-filled musical with the kid-friendly medium of puppetry gives birth to a raunchy love child and makes for a rollicking evening. Director **Kevin Christopher**’s team pulls off the ambitious enterprise with élan.

Rendering randy Dr. Frank-N-Furter, reticent Janet, and the other familiar characters in felt and fur raises *Rocky Horror*’s naughtiness to a new level. Scantly clad people behaving badly has become routine in modern theater. Bumping and grinding by Bert and Ernie’s 3-foot-tall cousins, however, feels much racier and funnier. One human appears among the frisky foam creatures to play Rocky, the object of every character’s desire. The puppet-on-puppet action is hot. Actor **Andy Butterfield** getting freaky with his fabric castmates? Scorching.

Richard O’Brien’s ***The Rocky Horror Show*** (1973) began as a London stage musical before it was made into the 1975 Tim Curry movie that became a midnight cult fave. The plot pays cheeky homage to B-grade horror and sci-fi flicks of the 1950s.

On a dark and stormy night, newly engaged Brad and Janet come upon a sinister-looking castle after their car breaks down. They need to borrow a phone, but the mansion’s inhabitants uncover the virginal twosome’s deeper needs. Lord of the lair Dr. Frank-N-Furter takes them up to his lab and unveils the blond muscleman he created, Rocky. A perfect specimen, with an uncontrolled libido.

Extensive liberation of everyone’s libido ensues. When Frank’s policy of “give yourself over to absolute pleasure” goes too far, his extraterrestrial bosses terminate his mission. For Brad and Janet, their night at the castle means “nothing can ever be the same.”

Christopher skillfully orchestrates a large cast on the Black Box's modest-sized stage. Clustered to one side are 11 black-clad performers: seven standing at microphones and four seated in the band. Narrator **Seth Jarvis** stands behind two rows of three actors who sing and speak the parts that the puppets enact. Music director and pianist **Nate Venet** also plays Riff Raff's role from behind the keyboard. The show runs 85 minutes without intermission, and the ensemble delivers a consistently high level of energy and execution.

The puppeteers work in full view of the audience. They also wear black, including beekeeper-like hoods, and move so stealthily against the black floor and backdrop that they seem to disappear. One puppeteer manipulates each creature, synching the character's movements with the actor's vocals. Particularly stellar puppetmasters are Christopher, swooping around the stage with Frank's manic zest, and **Meghan Dewald**, who captures Brad's variations on goofy disbelief.

The '50s drive-in set, well-conceived by **Timothy Shuker-Haines** and **Jon Malboeuf**, provides plenty of room. A movie screen allows for an Ed Wood-esque prologue short, "It Came in Outer Space," during the opening song; it also serves as the castle's TV monitor and a scrim to view sex scenes in shadow.

Christopher and Dewald, along with **Catherine Alston** and **Jessica Bernard**, constructed the wildly bewigged, anatomically correct cast of creatures. ("Puppet Nudity!" is one of the show's warnings. Do *not* bring the kids.) Alston costumed the puppets brilliantly. If Miss Piggy ever needs a black satin thong, fishnets and vinyl fuck-me heels, Alston is her go-to wardrobe woman.

All the performers give spirited interpretations of their characters' spoken lines, especially Venet as Riff Raff and **Rick Homan** as Brad. Their singing voices were the least polished on opening night, but the rest of the ensemble was in fine vocal form. Standouts include **G. Richard Ames**, whose bass makes a super-sexy Frank, **Alice Levitt's** lusty Magenta and **Ariel Cohen's** sweet Janet.

In a production that overflows with inventive elements, mixing one human into the puppet cast is the true stroke of genius. Andy Butterfield simply rocks as horny Rocky, embracing lascivious interspecies interaction with athletic abandon. He sings, dances and, yes, has sexual relations with his felted friends, while confidently sporting satin briefs and high-heeled boots.

With this show, Christopher and company accomplish something remarkable: adding a fresh twist to beloved original material. In "The Time Warp," for example, the puppets' tiny felt hips and fishnet-clad legs doing the pelvic thrust *will* drive you insane — with laughter.