

Burlington **Free Press**

Rowdy puppets co-star Saints & Poets original comedy

Brent Hallenbeck, Burlington Free Press

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Kevin Christopher isn't sure when the idea came to him to take a quasi-pornographic film about brutality in the Roman Empire and adapt it into a musical comedy featuring puppets.

He's been obsessed with the 1980 movie "Caligula" starring Malcolm McDowell and Helen Mirren since watching it age-inappropriately as a high-school student. When he saw a tongue-in-cheek Broadway production eight years ago of "Xanadu" — like "Caligula," originally a film that Christopher said was "kind of awful" — he realized he could make a musical comedy about Roman debauchery work as satire.

Finally, Christopher noted, "I have unleashed it on others." Part of the creative team at the Burlington-based Saints & Poets Production Company, Christopher has "O, Caligula! A Mvsical" ready for its debut tonight at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

As should be expected of a work dealing with a sexually and violently excessive tyrant, "O, Caligula!" is explicit. A rehearsal last week at the RETN television studios revealed that the script does indeed contain the phrase "hot forbidden puppet sex." During a scene portraying one such hand-puppet tryst, director Seth Jarvis told puppet operators Jessica Bernard and Chris Caswell that "it will look weirdly scandalous if you show a little wrist."

Jarvis said his work on "O, Caligula!" helps "in my bid to become the Roger Corman of Burlington theater," referring to the director known for his broad, B-movie material. Though Caligula's image might be somewhat built upon exaggeration an infamous Roman emperor can always be satirized.

"Sometimes I think the only response to brutality is humor," he said.

Christopher found out early and often how offbeat his idea for a musical comedy about Caligula was. He said he asked numerous people in the past 11 years if they'd like to write the music for his creation featuring puppets as well as human performers. Most, he said, remarked "That sounds interesting" and fled as quickly as they could.

One didn't flee: Patricia Julien, a professor of music at the University of Vermont, signed on to make the music for "O, Caligula!" She has overseen music for productions at UVM and Vermont Stage, and has also worked with Christopher and the crew at Saints & Poets.

Julien said Christopher doesn't speak of complex musical structures but instead conveys the feeling he wants music to evoke, giving the work a more creative flavor. She's drawn to the work of Saints & Poets because it brings together a creative team of actors, writers, directors and puppeteers.

"I really love it, in part because of all the collaboration," Julien said.

The songs she and Christopher devised include one that puts the disposition of Caligula in its proper light ("He'll scream/He'll yell/He'll raise a little hell"). Another has Bob Bolyard singing a ditty about the laundry list of Roman rulers named Caesar; the song's title, naturally, is "Caesar Salad."

Bolyard, a comic actor known for his work with Lyric Theatre and the drag troupe The House of LeMay, said he's a fan of the work of Saints & Poets, whose previous productions include Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" and the Jarvis-penned "The Moreau Horrors." He asked Jarvis if he could take part in the company's next production.

"That was an exciting email to get," Jarvis said.

Bolyard said he's drawn by the idea of working on a new production like "O, Caligula!" "It wasn't the same old thing," he said of his initial attraction to the play. "It wasn't doing someone else's work; it was something new."

That newness poses challenges, according to Jarvis, which is why a versatile comic actor like Bolyard was crucial. Actors take on several roles in "O, Caligula!" and Jarvis said they need to be loose and natural performers who can do comedy and sing.

"It's not a show that has been done, so a lot of it is figuring it out together," Jarvis said.

Christopher likes the way Jarvis, as the play's director, has figured out his admittedly weird idea. "Seth has gotten more substance out of it than was ever intended," Christopher said.

"O, Caligula!" is meant to be entertaining, Jarvis said, but there's room for audiences to find social commentary. When watching a TV news account about dysfunctional government, Jarvis said a viewer might reflect on seeing "O, Caligula!" and wonder, "Why not put a horse in the Senate?"

If you go:

- WHAT: "O, Caligula! A Musical," by The Saints & Poets Production Company
- WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays through May 2
- WHERE: Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, Burlington
- TICKETS: \$20. www.saintsandpoetsproductions.org