

Burlington **Free Press**

Saints & Poets mines laughs in 'O Caligula'

Brent Hallenbeck, Burlington Free Press

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The Saints & Poets Production Company's "O Caligula! A Musical" opens with animated film-styled titles that, while a cute idea, go on a bit too long.

That's pretty much the only misstep in a production that's hilarious, filthy and endlessly clever. "O Caligula!" is probably the funniest original production the Burlington-based company has come up with and surprises with the quality of its music, which is decidedly tongue-in-cheek yet hits all the marks you expect a more-traditional musical to hit.

"O Caligula!" — which played to a nearly full house Thursday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts — works so well because it tries to do so little; it aims only to be amusing. Even in its more serious moments you know there's a laugh just waiting to burst out.

The production was devised by Saints & Poets co-founder Kevin Christopher and based in part on the largely pornographic (and largely panned) 1979 film "Caligula" about ancient Rome's most notoriously debauched emperor. "O Caligula!" provides something of a history lesson through two hours of laughs, song, occasional puppetry and partial nudity but rides on its mantra of doing nothing unless it's entertaining. The ditty "Caesar Salad," as sung by the dying emperor Tiberius (played by Bob Bolyard), rattles off the litany of Latin leaders in a way that sets the picture of what's about to transpire but without a hint of stuffiness.

Sean Martin plays Caligula and knows exactly what the production (directed with great energy by Seth Jarvis) calls for. Martin plays the part as big as the Roman Empire itself, with exaggerated vaudevillian eye-batting and a knowing expression that announces to all that this is a farce that cannot be wrought too broadly.

The cast of 10 displays sharp comic pacing and singing voices that range from capable to terrific. Blythe Usher as Caligula's sister/lover (yep, that relationship is part of what made Caligula so infamous) shows off the strongest vocals of the night as the conniving Drusilla. Burlington theatergoers know Syndi Zook as the executive director of Lyric Theatre who only takes the stage for the company's curtain speech, but as the head of the Roman Senate she whips off some of the night's best lines with quintessential timing. ("I have a decree to make," the ditz Caligula announces, prompting Zook as the Senate leader to respond, "Not a real word, but go ahead.")

The acknowledgement within the production that the characters know they're taking part in a play is part-Marx Brothers and part-Coen Brothers, giving "O Caligula!" an energizing "anything can happen" vibe. The frequent we're-all-in-this-together asides — "Scene one and already with the puns," Patrick Clow as the praetorian guard Macro announces — let the crowd feel like they're part of the production.

Some of the best roles are among the smallest, including the bumbling senator Claudius, played by Rick Homan with an Andy Richter-like sad-sack persona. G. Richard Ames might create the most memorable character of the night when he dons a ridiculous yet ingenious horse suit to play Incitatus, Caligula's trusted equine oracle. ("I don't know much except eatin', trottin' and a little pop psychology," Incitatus says.)

Christopher wrote the song's lyrics with the same attention to word play that peppers the spoken-word portion of the script. ("O Caligula/That was big o' ya!") He pairs those lyrics with music written by Patricia Julien (played on keyboards by Abigail Sperry) that's deceptively simple yet covers a great deal of emotional ground. There are plenty of goofy numbers like "My Horse, My Horse," but then there's a heavier number such as "The Rain in Rome" that offers a "Threepenny Opera"-like sense of dark foreboding.

"O Caligula!" does go out on a bawdy limb; it finds humor in incest, pedophilia and voluminous murder, and manages to rhyme "aqueduct" with — oh, never mind. But it's all done for sheer entertainment, which makes it easier to forgive the sins of the creators of "O Caligula!" than to forgive the sins of the man himself.

If you go:

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