

Theater Review: Puppets tackle book-burning

By Jim Lowe

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Jim Lowe / Staff Photo

From left, G. Richard Ames and Chris Caswell are Boris and Anya in Caswell's "The Puppet Shoppe" at Burlington's Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

BURLINGTON — Chris Caswell's new play "The Puppet Shoppe" takes its inspiration from Ray Bradbury's famous 1953 novel, "Fahrenheit 451," but — because of its use of puppets — adds a more lighthearted comic effect to its otherwise grim tale.

Thursday's performance at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts proved a charming bit of storytelling, with plenty of drama as well as comic moments, but compelling for its deeply human moments. It was presented by The Saints & Poets Production Company, a Colchester-based nonprofit supporting puppetry in theater.

Remaining performances at the Off Center are at 7:30 p.m. today and 2 p.m. Sunday. "The Puppet Shoppe" can also be seen as part of a studio audience at 8 p.m. Sept. 28 at Lake Champlain Access Television in Colchester.

Like "Fahrenheit 451," "The Puppet Shoppe" is about burning books, its causes and ramifications. Because of the overwhelming power of unvetted information being spread by the Internet, the government has taken over all access to information — promising only the facts.

Books have been banned and burned with the idea of making them available online. (Sound familiar?) But also banned is storytelling and, with that, the public use of metaphor.

The tale is told through two employees of what was once The Puppet Shoppe. Because of the ban on storytelling, the puppets — with their mouths sewn shut — are now sold as dolls. Boris has a book, and Anya is concerned about the perilous consequences. Of course, she's right, but getting there is all the fun.

The Saints & Poets production, directed by Jordan Gullikson, proved a particularly polished one. Caswell played Anya with theater veteran G. Richard Ames as Boris. Both were comfortable with their dual roles as characters and puppeteers, drawing the audience into their story comfortably and beautifully.

Adding to the story's effectiveness substantially was a particularly fine sound design with original music by Burlington composer Johnnie Day Durand. Often incidental music in theater is self-serving, even distracting, but Durand's attractive soundscape not only creates a perfect atmosphere, it effectively supports the plot.

The imaginative and visually supportive set, as well as the effective dramatic lighting, was by Todd Townsend, while the most appropriate costumes were by Catherine Alston.

Caswell's "The Puppet Shoppe" is charming, entertaining and imaginative theater.

Off Center for the Dramatic Arts

The Saints & Poets Production Company presents the premiere production of "The Puppet Shoppe," by Chris Caswell, through Sunday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, 294 N. Winooski Ave. in Burlington. Remaining performances are at 7:30 p.m. today and 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$15 and available at the door or at the Flynn Regional box office, 863-5966, www.flyntix.org. "The Puppet Shoppe" can also be seen at 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 28, at Lake Champlain Access Television, Creek Farm Plaza in Colchester. Admission is by donation; call 862-5724 or go online to leatv.org. For information, visit www.saintsandpoetsproductions.org.