

Optimism! or Voltaire's *Candide* at Spooky Action Theater

May 1, 2013 by Roger Caitlin

By the time Voltaire got around to writing *Candide*, he had been kicked out of Paris a couple of times for his outspoken work. The 1759 book, whose subtitle was “or Optimism,” earned him the enmity of the government and religious leaders alike, as well as lasting fame.

The latest variation on *Candide* aims to be just as brash and scathing as the original, in which all manner of misfortune makes the title character's cheery outlook look more and more absurd. Such is the focus of the Spooky Action Theater's delightful adaptation that it has inverted the original title as *Optimism! Or: Voltaire's Candide*.



Candide was originally written following some immense calamities, from the Seven Years' War to a 1755 earthquake and tsunami in Lisbon that destroyed the city and killed up to 100,000 people. Following all of that, the idea of “all is for the best” seems ludicrous, or at least ripe for satire.

So, then, is the current version, coming at a time of its own calamities, following the 30 chapters of *Candide*'s travels in a hyper-condensed, hyper-active presentation that uses every inch of the basement theater of the Universalist National Memorial Church.

As the play begins, a series of two-foot letters cut in Styrofoam scatter around the perimeter of the theater in the round, and in the four banks of seats the cast of nine eventually make their way. Soon, the characters jump from their chairs, grab letters and re-arrange them to the motto of the day: THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS before the series of unfortunate incidents begins to undermine the notion.

Fresh-faced Ryan Alan Jones portrays young Candide, who takes absolutely seriously the optimistic teachings of his philosophy teacher Pangloss (Michael Kevin Darnall). He'll need it as he slams into all kinds of adversity – falling in love with a beauty named Cunegonde, and getting immediately banished for it; being abducted, lashed, and inducted into an army by the Bulgars.

That only begins a journey to Lisbon, Buenos Aires, El Dorado, Surinam, and Turkey in travels that inevitably bring death, disaster, riches, ruin, and torture amid scores of characters. Still, Candide is bent on keeping a smile and holding hope he'll find his original love, whom he heard has been raped and disemboweled, and survived, but turned ugly. Eventually there is a reunion of many of the main figures and a turn toward true happiness that involves a little more practicality and still rings true for the 21st century.

The long journey is kept light, however, by the marvelous adaptation by T.J. Edwards, who rewrites everything in witty, modernized couplets that rejects out of hand the musical version of *Candide* that had previously been a hit. Basing his version on Richard Aldington's 1928 translation, he layers on the rhymes that alternately induce delight and groans, with internal rhymes that whatever the success have to be admired. Like the most nimble wordplay in hip-hop, it's an accomplishment that doesn't fail to entertain, and the beauty of an in-the-round presentation is that you can see the smiles on the rest of the audience as it goes along as well.

But the Spooky Action production directed by Michael Chamberlin is more than in-the-round, it's 360 degrees in every direction, with actors diving from dumbwaiter doors, popping out through projection room holes, jumping from chairs and scuffling on the floor, painted in the blues of the ocean or earth's cosmos.

It wouldn't work without a top notch cast game for such action, and this production has one. Besides Jones, the only other character to play just one role is Patricia Lynn, whose Cunegonde has two personalities after she somehow turns from beauty to monster. Others in the diverse, able ensemble, each with their own highlighted moments include Adeoye, Rosemary Regan, Jessica Shearer, John Tweel, Ryan Tumulty, and Gregory Stuart in addition to Darnall (who may have the coolest credit in the bios: playing Omar's lover on HBO's "The Wire").

The set design by Giorgos Tsappas is nothing if not versatile (with the letters making a key return in the end); it's highlighted by Brian S. Allard's light design and Bradley Porter's sound, with birdcalls even before the action starts. The cardboard cutouts of Deb Crierie's props lend them a nifty uniformity.

Voltaire's work has endured because its excesses continue to speak to our times, and the dazzlingly alive Spooky Action Theater production found an exceedingly entertaining way to bring it to life. The company's name, incidentally, comes from the Einstein term for two particles that can become so related that a change in one brings a change in the other no matter the distance. The theater certainly finds a way to close that distance.

Running Time: Approximately 2 hours 20 minutes with one intermission. Advisory: Adult themes.

Optimism! Or Voltaire's Candide runs at the Spooky Action Theater in the Universalist National Memorial Church, 1810 16th St. NW, Washington D.C., through May 19. Tickets are available at 202-248-0301