

Busy holiday comedy provides plenty of laughs

By Michael Grossberg

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Too much theater apparently isn't enough for MadLab.

Following up on the success of *Too Much Theatre* in 2003, MadLab has concocted a seasonal sequel with the same high-energy, scattershot parodies of the classics.

Fast-paced and fun-loving if uneven, *Too Much Christmas* offers MadLab's brisk reinterpretations of every holiday favorite from *The Nutcracker* and *A Christmas Carol* to *It's a Wonderful Life* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

Not that any particular piece is guaranteed to be done during the 75-minute one-act, which changes at each performance.

At Thursday's frenetic but smoothly directed opening, the 60-minute buzzer sounded with five of the 25 pieces left to perform, giving the enthusiastic audience reasons to return.

As the confident host, Katie Palcsak adds well-scripted jokes and sly commentary while playing the audience. Dressed like a Playboy-bunny version of a Santa elf, Palcsak embodies three of the evening's recurring themes: the sexy, the silly and the sweet.

Among the stories that receive

► MadLab Theatre will present *Too Much Christmas* at 8 tonight — and 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, through Dec. 23 — at 105 N. Grant Ave. Tickets cost \$8 to \$15, or \$6 for members, students and senior citizens. Call 614-470-2333 or visit www.madlab.net.

contemporary (and often cynical) new interpretations: *The Birth of Christ*, which offers a new theory about the source of Mary's pregnancy; *Boxing Day*, which might make Rocky proud; and the first Thanksgiving (thrown in for fun, along with a lame Christmas-related excuse).

MadLab usually knows when to limit a parody to one good punch line. Cases in point: *Silent Night*, a song with just the right new lyrics, and *The Little*

Drummer Boy, which involves a little drumming and that's it.

One of the cleverest bits is a version of *Alternative Holidays*, which starts with a hilarious exaggeration of how blacks celebrate Kwanzaa. But the skit is quickly canceled by a MadLab "lawyer" to avert any lawsuits because of the outrageous political incorrectness.

Also funny is a version of *Christmas in the Media*, which exposes a big target: Michael Moore. Peter Graybeal captures an essence of leering hypocrisy.

Although the audience votes at the end to pick the best of the two teams, it's hard to take sides given the brevity of the roles and script limitations.

The versatility of the red team (Rob Stretch, Lorinda Ostapuck, Nikki Johnson, Vanessa Forster

and Graybeal) and the green team (Ric Shoemaker, Stephen Woosley, Vicki Andronis, Jenn Feather and Cynthia Sopata) deserves general kudos.

All the props and costumes are onstage, inspiring a mad rush for each team to get ready each time Palcsak confirms the next play number, which is based on the audience's shouted requests.

Like too many sequels, *Too Much Christmas* lacks the freshness of its predecessor. And too often, theatergoers are left — and I do mean *left* — with political satire that falls flat because it's too obvious, false or both.

Yet with such a hellzapoppin show, MadLab still has its audience's numbers.

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