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'An Invitation Out' offers more than just another pretty face

Written by [Robert Nickles](#)



mustardseedtheatre.com / John Lamb

The Details

Venue: [Mustard Seed Theatre](#)

Director: Deanna Jent

Dates: April 17–May 3, 2015

In literature, great characters often make their finest choices in the midst of severe limitations. In the premiere production of "An Invitation Out," characters must make choices about identity within the confines of complex social expectations. Like any comedy of manners, the script hides profound truths behind the silliness and superficiality of human conventions. This visually stunning production combines fun and philosophy to produce a thoroughly entertaining social critique.

This production showcased yet another fine work from St. Louis playwright Shaulee Cook. In her program notes, she admits this script began with the thought: "Oscar Wilde would have been unstoppable on Twitter." As things began to unfold onstage, Cook's love of Oscar Wilde became clear. Every few lines paid homage to the great playwright, and I found myself struggling not to laugh so that I wouldn't miss the next zinger. The play follows the friends and family of avatar designer Wridget, played by the sometimes over-earnest Bob Thibaut, in a futuristic universe peopled primarily by men and women who live their entire lives "plugged in" to online chat rooms. When Wridget welcomes back his sister after she's given birth to a real-life child, a fanciful gathering of online A-listers descends to discuss the merits of their way of life. An offline guest played by Ellie Schwetye crashes the party, and chaos ensues. Schwetye's character Raskin provides a helpful guide for audience members who may find the screen names and technological aspects of the setting bewildering. Her beautifully feigned innocence holds up a mirror to the various characters with amusing

results. Justin Ivan Brown and Nicole Angeli prance and limp and waltz their way masterfully through various accents and personas as they trade roles between an obliging computer program host and XluciDenialX, a gender-fluid computer hacker and witty best friend of Wridget.

Julie Venegoni plays Wridget's sister Buttercup, the new mother and the character most comfortable in her dual awareness of online and offline responsibilities. Venegoni's poise and warmth ground the play and, along with Angeli's Xluci, frame the play's climax with just enough real humanity to bring things home. Her dashing husband FlyByNite, played by Daniel Lanier, provides additional emotional context with his attention to the practical considerations of partnership and offline parenthood.

Alicia Revé Like, Laura Ernst and Richard Strelinger round out the cast as the more technologically-dependent characters. Each one gives a remarkably well-rounded performance despite their characters' vapid personalities, especially Ernst as Flutterbye, Wridget's betrothed and the most popular blogger on the web.

The entire production hangs together seamlessly with an attention to detail typical of Mustard Seed shows, thanks in large part to Deanna Jent's expert direction and Beth Ashby's outstanding costume design. Mark Wilson's set and Michael Sullivan's light design portray the online chat room with creativity and a high level of technical finesse. Maggy Bort maintained a steady stream of Meg Brinkley's properties from off-stage, as well as a mostly on-time set of sound cues from Zoe Sullivan.

"An Invitation Out" continues at Mustard Seed Theatre through May 3rd. For more information, visit mustardseedtheatre.com.

Additional Info

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