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A reserved academic cuts loose in 'The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart'

BY CHRISTINE DOLEN

cdolen@MiamiHerald.com



Kathryn Garcia heads MDC Live Arts, which is presenting the National Theatre of Scotland's 'The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart' in Miami.

If you saw the Tony Award-winning musical *Once* at Miami's Arsht Center recently, a National Theatre of Scotland play opening Wednesday may sound just a bit familiar.

In *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*, the actors and musicians are one and the same. The show takes place in a bar, but in the case of *Prudencia*, the bar is real, not something cooked up by a set designer. The freeing force of love is a theme shared by the two music-laced pieces. And that music — Irish in the case of *Once*, Scottish-English (and more) in *Prudencia* — flows from some common traditions.

Yet if you venture over to Bar 337 (formerly PAX) on Southwest Eighth Street near Brickell — that's where *Prudencia* will have its brief run through Sunday — you'll discover that *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* is both more playfully immersive and intellectually provocative than the lovely *Once*.

"It's clever, funny, even a little bit romantic," says Kathryn Garcia, the executive director of Miami Dade College's MDC Live Arts, which is bringing *Prudencia* to Miami. "It

takes place in a bar, and you are in a bar. You get completely immersed in it — it's literally everywhere you look."

The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart takes place during what might have been a bone-dry academic conference in the Scottish town of Kelso, which is situated not too far north of Scotland's border with England. The subject up for discussion is border ballads, traditional songs from the region that explore history, life, love and, sometimes, the supernatural.

Prudencia, played by British actor Melody Grove, is an observant and rather reserved graduate student — Grove describes her as “a bit of a weirdo” — who finds her life changed by a gathering that proves anything but dry and dull. Think karaoke (Katy Perry, Kylie Minogue) and a special guest appearance by the devil himself.

The play was devised by director Wils Wilson and playwright David Grieg, who came up with the idea for the story and wrote in rhyming couplets. Wilson, an award-winning director with a long history of creating site-specific theater, recalled the process in a conversation from her home in England:

“David was writing in the corner of the rehearsal room. We knew what would happen — we had structure but not a lot of script — so he stayed a few paces ahead of where we were. He’s a bit of a magician,” Wilson says.

While border ballads are specific to the region where Prudencia takes place, the director says that the tradition does translate.

“That kind of folk tradition seems to apply everywhere: folk tales and folk songs, music and the idea of a story being told,” she says. “It seems very universal. We’ve done the show in Brazil, and they got it immediately.”

As for the risks of her cast performing for an imbibing audience in a bar, Wilson doesn’t see a problem; in fact, she loves the immediacy and the variables that immersive theater brings with it.

“ Prudencia feels like a real conversation between the performers and the audience. Every show is a step into the unknown: It’s more extreme than it is in a theater,” she observes. “The audience wants to fulfill its part of the bargain.”

Grove and her fellow actors have performed Prudencia in California and Texas on this short tour, and she notes that academics in the audience tend to laugh loudest. At first, Grove says, “it was terrifying to be so close to the audience. There’s no safety net, like in a normal proscenium theater. But then the audience becomes like a character in the play. There’s something amazing about having a very close conversation with them.”

Speaking in rhymed couplets is another challenge, but it’s one Grove relishes.

“You have to serve a certain rhythm, but if you do, it releases something — it unlocks emotion. It’s the rhythm of the heartbeat. It’s a great pleasure for an actor. The goal is to do them so well that they sound very natural,” she says.

Wilson feels that the rhyme functions as a metaphor, that “letting the rhyme take you is part of what happens to Prudencia.” Working with the actors, she tells them that the play lives on the words, not between them.

“It’s helpful to think of it as William Shakespeare vs. Harold Pinter,” she says.

MDC Live Arts’ Garcia saw the play when it stopped in Washington D.C. on a previous tour. She was struck by its topnotch acting and music, and by its adventuresome use of rhyme. And she’s determined that audiences in Miami should share in its spirit of fun.

"We'll have fish and chips available before the show, and little cheese sandwiches at intermission. There will be shots of Benromach Scotch," she says. "Really great theater wraps you up in this other experience. When I saw it, it swept me up in this new world of Prudencia Hart."

If you go

What: MDC Live Arts presentation of the National Theatre of Scotland's 'The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart' by David Greig.

Where: Bar 337 (formerly PAX), 337 SW Eighth St., Miami.

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, through Sunday.

Cost: \$30 (MDC students \$10).

Information: 305-237-3010 or www.mdclivearts.org.

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