

## THEATER REVIEW | PALE IDIOT

## Plot travels a long road for payoff

By Michael Grossberg

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

MadLab Theatre goes mad for plays such as *Pale Idiot* — short, satirical and silly, with an edge that lets the energetic ensemble have fun.

At Thursday's opening, the recent New York Fringe Festival hit proved to be sillier than one would expect from its billing as a dark comedy about the possibility of removing oppressive power structures.

Playwright Kirk Lynn focuses on a mythic village and the antics of a mental-health inspector whose odd behavior seems designed to drive everyone else crazy.

MadLab's buoyant production, while intermittently amusing, doesn't hide the play's structural flaw: The inspector's successive cat-and-mouse games with his victims aren't enough to sustain the show until a revelatory final twist.

Brian Spangler-Campbell is convincing in the ambiguous title role. Even given such an iconic part, with wild streams of monologue that seem idiotic but might be something else,

► MadLab Theatre will present *Pale Idiot* at 8 tonight — and 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays through March 25 — at 105 N. Grant Ave. Tickets cost \$8 to \$15, or \$7 for members, students and senior citizens. Call 614-470-2333 or visit [www.madlab.net](http://www.madlab.net).

the solid actor finds the Idiot's emotional center — which helps make the ending plausible.

Buoyed by Tom Sadler's ghost-whisper sound design, Randi Morgan's medieval-fantasy costumes and scenic designer Anthony Pellechia's impressionistic wood-plank forest, MadLab hints at the cautionary fable within the comedy.

Except for the moody blackouts between scenes, directors Peter Graybeal and Ric Shoemaker keep the pacing farcical.

They encourage most actors to jump into their roles with a manic energy that at times seems funnier to the actors than to the audience.

The approach works best with Andy Batt's Inspector, a frenetic tour de farce. When he arrives in

town, he quickly takes over with a mischievous blend of manipulation and apparent madness.

Vanessa Forster exhibits welcome restraint as the Mayor's Assistant. Smirking but smart, she manages to stay in control a little longer than the other characters before experiencing her comeuppance.

David Thonnings goes for obvious laughs as the easily fooled Altar Boy, with Sarah Brunet as the flustered Maid.

Lanky Jim Azelvandre makes good use of physical shtick as the Blacksmith's Assistant, one of several townspeople who almost literally become puppets at one end of the Inspector's string. (Their behavior lends credence to the old saying about what happens when you give people enough rope.)

The piece is peppered with profanity and a leering subtext, but its theme is more social than sexual.

In its structure, the play resembles an unusually extended version of the joke immortalized in the film *The Aristocrats*. But is just one memorable punch line worth the long buildup?

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