

CityPULSE

REVIEW

‘Roller derby’ makes great use of MSU’s tiny Arena Theatre



A well-rounded cast offers “For the Love of (or, the roller derby play)” through the weekend at MSU.

COURTESY

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“FOR THE LOVE OF (OR, THE ROLLER DERBY PLAY)”

The Arena Theatre, MSU Auditorium

7:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 15 -Thursday, November 17; 8 p.m. Friday, November 18; 2 p.m. Sunday, November 20

\$22.50/\$17.50 seniors and MSU employees/\$12.50 students

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Mary Cusack

Of all the spaces on Michigan State University’s campus to perform a play about roller derby, the Arena Theater in the basement of the MSU Auditorium would seem the least likely venue, given its tiny size. Yet MSU’s Department of Theatre thrives when given spatial challenges, including that time they produced the science fiction epic “A Wrinkle in Time” in said location.

“For the Love of (or, the roller derby play)” is not a science fiction epic, but it does require the simulation of some epic derby battles. The plot centers on Joy Ride (Meleah Acuff), a rookie on the Brooklyn Scalawags roller derby team. She is thrilled to team up with the legendary Lizzie Lightning (Tessa Kresch), and sparks fly between them.

As the story unwinds, we learn that Joy is a few years out of college, working a boring retail job, and living with her college girlfriend Michelle (Sophie Psiakis). Joy has decided to pursue roller derby to find something that brings her, well, joy. Joy and some sense of identity.

This aspect of the story will resonate with many audience members, some of whom have been there and done that, some of whom are currently trying to define themselves, and many of whom will face that challenge in a few years, as the students in the audience commence into the real world.

As the derby season rolls on, Joy and Michelle’s relationship is challenged as they face adulting things like job changes, relocation, goals, dreams, and commitment. The story doesn’t offer a tidy denouement, but instead is an entertaining and poignant slice of life.

Playwright Gina Femia has developed a well-rounded supporting cast, and each of the Scalawags gets a moment in the spotlight that gives the audience insight into

their lives and loves. The whole cast is terrific and clearly comfortable in their roles, but two stand out in particular. As the stereotypical loud-talkin' Brooklyn broad, Katie Clemons is perfect as Hot Flash, a senior member of the team who is as passionate about her family as she is for her sport. Shelby Ginsburg plays Squeaky Mouse, a young, sweet and goofy derby girl who provides most of the comedic relief. She is proud as proud of her smallness as she is of her smelliness.

Revisiting the use of space, the MSU Department of Theater typically utilizes outstanding production values to overcome issues with the Arena Theater space, and this play is no exception. In addition to solid casting and directing, Alexis Black assembled a talented design staff. Lillian Meyers' fantastic lighting design enhances Sloan Lemberg's fun choreography. Not only do the cast get many opportunities to dance, they also mimic roller derby moves and battles with creative choreography.

The Arena Theater now boasts a giant digital backdrop, which helps give the space a larger feel and also allows for media designers like Mona Jahani to create visual effects that further enhance the overall experience. Rounding out the uniqueness of this production, Sound Designer Thalia Pearce worked with students from the MSU School of Music who created original compositions that serve as theme songs for each character.

“For the Love of (or, the roller derby play)” is about roller derby, to be sure. But more than that, it is a very fine search-for-self story presented against an entertaining and empowering industry.