
Entertainment & Life

Pasture Prime Players pays homage to film noir with 'Maltese Falcon'

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CHARLTON — Pasture Prime Players present a fascinating stage adaptation of the film “The Maltese Falcon,” regarded by many to have set the bar for most pulp-style detective stories that have come since.

In this homage to the noir classic, adapted for the stage by Helen Borgers, after the partner of iconic gumshoe Sam Spade (Michael Kaitbenski) is killed, he gets “more than he bargained for” as he works to solve his biggest case.

Kaitbenski, virtually in every scene, does a commendable job and does not try to do a Humphrey Bogart impersonation. However, it is hard to ignore the legendary actor’s influence, which made the character of Sam Spade renowned.

Unfortunately, this unintentionally causes an imbalance in the performance, as sometimes the Spade dialogue comes out muttered and sped up. From the outset, he is almost unintelligible, although there are some moments, primarily in Act 2, when his performance comes across much more at ease.

Sam is lured by sultry schemer Bridgid O’Shaughnessy (Sonya Richards) into a world of ruthless smugglers and thieves all after a priceless Maltese falcon. Richards has a strong presence on stage, much like that of a young Katherine Hepburn. She seems to have an easier time with Borger’s dialogue, helping to make any scenes between her and Kaitbenski more engaging, although their final scene together at the end of the show runs on far too long.

O'Shaughnessy is somehow involved in the death of Spade's business partner Miles Archer (Sean Gardell), who is killed while trying to find a man named Thursby. Thursby also winds up dead, with Sam as a prime suspect. Sam does all he can to clear his name and solve the murders.

Not until Act 2 do we meet suave, sophisticated archvillain Casper Gutman (Eric Hart), who uses money and guile to manipulate Sam into leading him to the precious statue. Spade also encounters the morally bankrupt Joel Cairo (Joe Sawyer) and Gutman's cold-blooded killer henchman, Wilmer Cook (Christopher Crockett-Sears).

Hart, especially, elevates the show, providing a masterful interpretation of both the Borger and Hammett text. His scenes with Kaitbanski play out as if Gutman and Spade are two worldly chess masters at work. A contest of champions and the prize is the Maltese falcon.

Spade's secretary Effie (Rose Gage) helps Sam deal not only with O'Shaughnessy but also with the widow of Sam's late partner, Iva (Preeti Tiwari). Gage does an admirable job as Effie, who provides the only moral stability Sam can depend on in his life after having his own morality put into question.

On far too briefly, Tiwari provides some delightful moments of comic relief as the insecure, not-so-grieving widow who is head-over-heels in love with Sam.

The stage is kept basic and compact due to limited space, but the cast works proficiently, maneuvering around the restricted surroundings and were aided by effective isolated lighting.

There is a phone booth, a desk with an old swivel chair (a very loudly moving old swivel chair), a fireplace on an elevated second level, and a living area, all within approximately 15 feet of stage space. The set is surrounded by drab, grey painted walls, perfectly reminiscent of the black-and-white film classic. All the cast is garbed similarly, an appropriate nod to the mood of the 1941 film directed by John Huston.

Borger's adaptations uses some dialogue that was not in the movie. Also added is some "R-rated" language, which may take some by surprise.

The bigger concern with the adaptation is that Borger's script doesn't always seem to allow for enough interpretation by the actors.

In trying to faithfully adapt the story to provide the audience with the same level of excitement as when original audiences saw the film, some of the dialogue is interpreted by the actors differently, causing them to lose all sense of rhythm.

The cadence of a film noir like “Maltese Falcon” does not translate well to the stage. While one actor tries to speak quickly to mimic the pacing sometimes found in older movies, other actors try to counter with a more naturally paced dialect, thus upsetting the overall balance of the piece.

Another issue arises in the blocking, because certain action sequences that may have worked on film look absolutely comical on stage, especially applying to any staged fight scenes between Sam and some of the other male characters. Otherwise, the show’s direction under Don Konpacki was solid.

Although the second act spends far too much time wrapping up plot points, the main characters all get to shine a little more, providing some of most interesting moments in the show.