

Low Brows and High Stakes on North Brooklyn Stages

by Benjamin Sutton



Plan 9 from Outer Space

Based on a screenplay by Edward Wood Jr.

Adapted and directed by Frank Cwiklik

The Ring Cycle (Part 1+2)

Based on the opera by Richard Wagner

Adapted by Jeremy Beck, Dave Dalton and Performance Lab 115

Directed by Dave Dalton

Oft-produced canonical works and fondly remembered kitsch make some of the best fodder for imaginative adaptations, providing a shared cultural foundation from which to take unconventional flights of whimsy—see the upcoming Broadway musical interpretation of Pedro Almodovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, or last season's Shakespearized *version* of *The Big Lebowski*, both of which straddle high-low boundaries. Current productions at North Brooklyn's two foremost black box theaters take on texts from opposite ends of the cultural totem pole: Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, the 1958 sci-fi film *many consider* the worst movie ever made; and Richard Wagner's epic opera masterpiece *The Ring Cycle*. One sticks improbably, unfortunately close to the original, the other goes for a no-holds-barred transformation and comes out on top.

At the Brick, *DM Theatrics'* exercise in low-tech verisimilitude produces just that: a canny stage adaptation of a quaint sci-fi flop that repeats too many of the original's errors. Worse still, at almost two hours, their *Plan 9* (through October 31) has an additional forty minutes of hurried scene changes and extraneous comic set pieces in which to exhaust its limited charms. There are a few of those: director/adaptor Frank Cwiklik's cleverly deployed video effects and digital scenery (there is no set to speak of, save a series of wall-sized projections); Douglas Mackrell, like The Amazing Criswell in the original, with cocked eyebrow and booming voice, carrying the evening as the campy narrator. Even the absurd plot—about saucer-piloting aliens resurrecting the dead to aid in their invasion of Earth—packs aughts-appropriate appeal as a knowing but potentially subversive genre mashup. (DM Theatrics is well acquainted with the form, having produced this spring's sold-out run of the aforementioned Coen Brothers-Bard combo, *Two Gentlemen of Lebowsky*.)

Unfortunately this production's *Matrix*-wardrobed aliens and clueless detectives are all about as swift as the mummy-lurching zombies chasing them, returning to fusty jokes while the clunky narrative runs its deadening course. The most intriguing exercise in *Plan 9*, though, involves figuring out where the original's many, *many* problems end and this production's shortcomings begin. Because, certainly,

adapting "the worst film of all time" gives you some leeway when things go wrong, and there were moments in the preview performance I attended when technical slippages seemed just as likely to have been intended and accidental. Nonetheless, the original's sloppiness doesn't provide nearly enough leverage for DM Theatrics to pull off their *Plan 9*.

A more ambitious, potentially sacrilegious (at least for devout opera followers) and extremely rewarding adventure in creative adaptation, [Performance Lab 115's](#) *The Ring Cycle (Part 1+2)* (through October 30) mixes Wagner and wrestling. The evening translates the first half of the four-part epic into steroid-pumped Americana. In part one Wotan (Jeff Clarke), the king of the gods and ruler of the wrestling ring, clad in shiny gold and red tights with headband, winged sunglasses and fake musculature, battles the tag-teaming giants Fasolt (Michael Melkovic) and Fafner (Christopher Hirsh). In exchange for constructing his picturesque castle in the clouds—Fafner: "Do you know how hard it is to build a rainbow?!"—Wotan promised the base duo his sister-in-law. Rather than hand over the damsel, he charges his sassy servant Loge (Christopher Ryan Richards) to find something more valuable, which he does: a golden ring that gives its wearer power over the whole world (or, in wrestling terms, super-badass moves). The rest of the multi-generational narrative inspired by Norse sagas, ancient Greek dramas and a 12th century [German epic poem](#) follows Wotan's attempts to regain control of the ring.

The second half of this slimmed-down and juiced up *Cycle* opens just as Wotan's badly beaten grandson Seigmund (Jeremy Beck) stumbles into Siegelind's (Rebecca Lingafelter) destitute living room. The shift in tone from the epic stylizing of the wrestlers-as-gods opening, all giant perm-wigged and soap opera plotted, to the rainy near-realism of post-intermission passages is extremely affecting and impressive. We've gone from a gleaming castle in the sky to a grimy couch in a sty. The sharp ensemble cast gets back to the extreme gestures of pro wrestling by cycle's end, though very clearly informed by the second section's much darker mood (tantric incestual sex notwithstanding). The non-mandatory audience participation never wears thin, high-five-ing, clapping and cheering for the prancing combatants being such an integral part of ring-side activities. Director Dave Dalton speeds through what would be a 5-hour double-bill at the Met (not including [set malfunctions](#)) in less than half that. Whither parts three and four? The analogy between athletes and deities is nothing new, but the glee of combining the most debased of the former with the most grandiloquent of the latter proves inexhaustible. At once respectful of the original's complex plot and happy to point out its absurd machinations and moralizing, PL115's *Ring Cycle* has *Plan 9* pinned.