

Vaudeville Lives On Thanks To Esther's Follies



By Tammy Borgeisen

As I sat down to watch the comedic madness that is Esther's Follies, I thought two things: "I hope this is as funny as everyone says it is," and "great, they have a bar!"

Almost two hours and a couple glasses of wine later, I emerged from the theater and stepped into the cold January night wiping tears of laughter away from my eyes.

Esther's Follies is a fast paced spiral of magic, comedy, political satire, and song that has entertained audiences in Austin for over a quarter of a century. The conception of Esther's Follies was in the spring of 1977, when 6th Street was little more than randomly roam-

ing artists and nightlife lovers. Michael Shelton and Shannon Sedwick, who managed Austin's popular Liberty Lunch, decided to pursue other endeavors and lease an old bar at 515 6th Street. Their first soiree at the bar was appropriately held on April Fool's Day, and they've been partying it up ever since.

What began as informal improv quickly turned into a stream of magic, music, and comedy routines. The theater has since moved to the corner of 6th and Red River, incorporating the infamous window that faces 6th as the stage's backdrop.

Inside, a mural of underwater adventures compliments the old Esther Williams paintings

that adorn the theater walls. Williams, the water loving actress of *Million Dollar Mermaid* fame, serves as an inspiration for the theater's own bathing beauty seen diving onto 6th Street.

The theater is small and inviting, and there really isn't a bad seat in the house. If you get there early, you may even be lucky enough to sit in the front and take your chances of being pulled onto stage. It's amazing how we find so much humor in the humiliation of others.

Everyone in the audience cheers and supports the cast's newest unsuspecting victim because we know full well the next person yanked up there could be one of us. And let me tell you, it's all fun and games until you're the

one pulled onto the stage. Standing up there with the spotlight shining down on you, you are completely incapable of seeing shit, and you feel like a complete asshole because, well, you are. All of a sudden you stop laughing, but amazingly enough no one else does. In the end, after making a complete fool of yourself, you laugh your way back to your seat and vow to take at least two shots of good ole' Johnny Walker Black at intermission. I'm not saying this was me... I just saw it first-hand. I would have chosen tequila.

The cast of Esther's has been perfecting their impeccable comedic performances for thirty years. It becomes quickly apparent that the audience-both inside and out- is just as big a part of the show as the cast. The cast combines improv and rehearsed skits with flawless ease, making the audience roar with laughter.

One of my favorite acts was the "grownup" version of Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*. In this tongue twisting, innuendo dropping act, Dr. Seuss' book is taken to new, hysterical sexual levels. Never have I laughed so hard at how dirty a children's story can become. Shaun Wainwright-Branigan and Cat Gonzaga play off each other with the greatest of ease. It is the classic tale of boy likes girl, girl shoots boy down, and they battle it all out through a rapid firing of banter and rhyme. In the end, girl gives in, boy and girl get it on, and the children in the audience are staring blankly with a look of, "Um... I don't get it" on their faces. All the while, their parents are hiding smiles of guilt and pleasure, realizing they will never be able to read that book to little Susie again.

Interweaving the random person on 6th into their comedy routines, the cast of Esther's found their jackpot. What better way to parody political satire and social deficiencies in Austin than to make an unsuspecting passerby part of the show?

As the ubiquitous George W. Bush, played flawlessly by Kerry Awn, takes the stage, the audience laughs and cheers, and well, mostly boos. With the grace and charm of an overzealous frat boy, George proclaims, "I can make a bong out of a Dr. Pepper can and some tinfoil!" George then turns and faces the audience that has gathered outside and gives them a solid "thumbs up." For some strange reason this makes them flee in all directions, tripping over each other as they try to get out of view. I still haven't figured out if it was because they realized they were being incorporated into the show, or they just couldn't bear being on the receiving end of anything from "Dubya."

The magic throughout Esther's Follies is also extremely entertaining. Ray Anderson, the show's magician, combines intrigue and humor as he effortlessly performs his tricks. Using clever wit and magic, Ray keeps the audience laughing and mesmerized throughout the entire show.

Whether he's dancing in tights to "Cuban Pete," or levitating on stage, Ray captures the moment perfectly. He transitions seamlessly from an over-the-top flamboyant magician whose pants are a little too tight and his shirt cut a little too low, to a notable, enigmatic illusionist. Backlit in blue lights and cast in shadows, Ray creates an air of wonder and vivid imagination. As the show progresses Ray's magic becomes more complex and mystifying until he is lifted by other cast members and impaled on top of a jagged spike. The illusion is captivating and impressive, leaving the audience in silent awe. I think this was the first time in the entire show that we actually stopped laughing.

As Esther's Follies came to an end, I finished my last sip of wine and realized the past two hours had completely flown by. Inside the little theater on 6th Street you enter a world of vaudevillian charm, and you leave taking a piece of its greatness with you. This show lives up to its reputation and more. It is theatrically brilliant, and a wonderful way to spend your Saturday night. **TV**

