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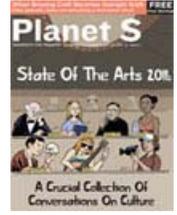


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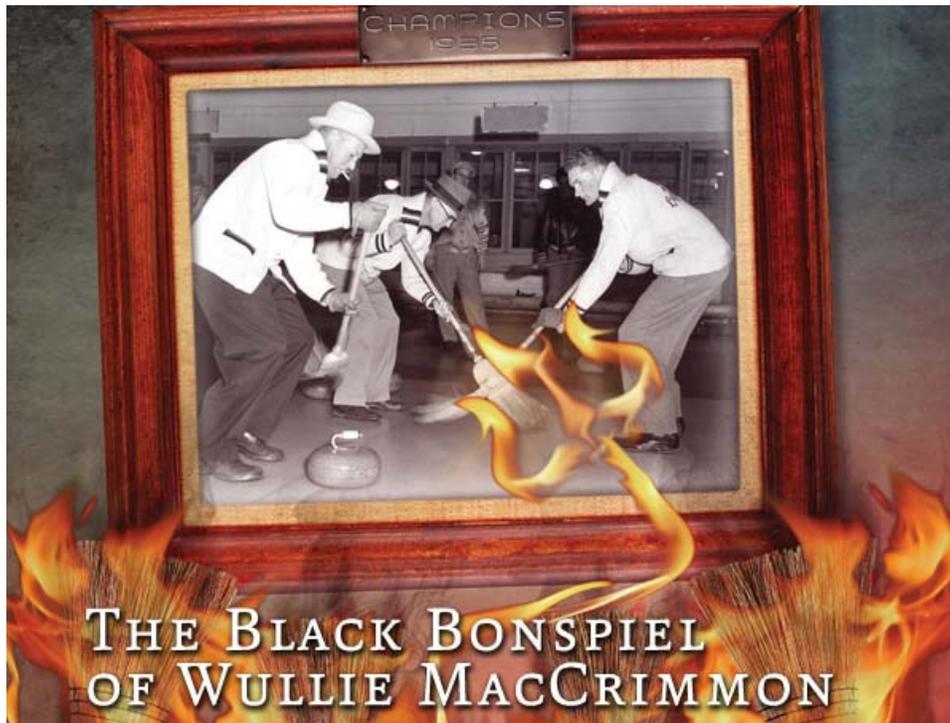
Review: The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon

by Aidan Morgan

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I've always wondered what I'd do if the Devil ever showed up at my door and offered me my deepest desire, in exchange wanting nothing more than my soul. After watching *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon*, I'm no closer to knowing how I'd respond – but I'd definitely want a canny old Scot looking over the contract.

The outlandishness of its premise – a curling match between a small-town rink and the champions of Hell – and the recognizable Western Canadian setting make *The Black Bonspiel* a surefire crowd-pleasing comedy. Yet playing the script for laughs produces certain problems: namely, that several sequences in the first act aren't particularly funny, especially for a 21st century audience. While there's plenty of comedy to be mined from a Devil who enjoys curling, some of the discussions of the first act feel a bit flat, as if we're being read out a recipe in lieu of the actual dish. This is not the fault of the production but of Mitchell's script, which can't resist forking out into tangents.

Bonspiel is set in the post-Depression era, but its sensibilities are rooted in the political and

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Carl Johnson (Musician, Library)

moral entanglements of the '70s and '80s. This produces moments that an older audience will enjoy but may invoke mild confusion among younger audiences. Lines like "let those upper bastards freeze in the dark" will tell you all that you need to know about the time and place of the script's production. The result is a play that is trickier to navigate than it first appears. In most cases, it's up to the audience to follow Mitchell's mind as it cobbles its themes together.

In the curling match that dominates the second act, the play takes off and begins to fly. Wullie and his crew face off against the rink from Hell (Judas Iscariot, Guy Fawkes, Macbeth). Robin Fisher's costume design for the Rink of the Damned is particularly enjoyable, putting them in historical outfits with plenty of brick-red and black to suggest an eternity of being charred.

As usual, the Globe has balanced established and emerging actors and put together an excellent cast. Jerry Franken, having played a Mitchell character before in *Jake and the Kid*, is so perfect a fit for the dour Wullie that it's hard to imagine anyone else in the role (I want to write a one-man play for Franken called "The Most Likable Man In The World"). Lee Boyes provided my favourite moments of the play, delivering his mockbeth soliloquies with an intensity and clarity that make me wish he'd play some genuine Shakespeare. Joey Tremblay plays his role of Old Cloutie to the hilt, alternately seductive and menacing, slightly aware of his Satanic ridiculousness but too in love with it to stop.

To my mind, though, deluxe kudos go to Maggie Huculak, who manages to turn the unsympathetic and cartoonishly ignorant Annie Brown into a strangely likeable character with a core of sadness. The character of Annie is a largely thankless figure that exists as a satirical lightning rod and a s We're supposed to laugh at her, but Huculak gives her enough depth and dignity that our laughter doesn't feel entirely mean-spirited. Huculak's portrayal is a small feat of performing, like a virtuoso improbably pulling off Chopin on a toy piano.

On its surface, *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon* is a story of a shoemaker who beats the Devil at his own game. But beneath that, W.O. Mitchell's play is a satire of morals, an extended black joke about a pure pragmatist whose clear-eyed understanding of evil allows him to tangle with turpitude and emerge unscathed. How thoroughly Canadian of him.

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- (Actors, Dot And Mae, Globe Theatre Sandbox Series)
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- (Regina Ward 2 Councillor)
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