

The Flying Doctor
Perchance Theatre

Perchance's production of the 17th-century Molière farce, as adapted by Evan Mercer, has a decidedly 20th-century Newfoundland flavour. Indeed, it might be useful for non-Newfoundlander patrons to attend the show accompanied by a *livyer*. But no matter what the audience's origin(s), the comedy in this performance is clear enough.

The story is an ancient one, old even in the 17th century: in the service of making the course of true love run just that little bit smoother, a person (the "doctor") assumes a disguise which, as the plot complicates and the pace increases, puts him in the situation of having to shift between himself and his assumed role ever faster until he is, more or less, on stage with himself as two separate characters simultaneously. Evan Mercer performs this taxing feat of physical comedy superbly, the action culminating in a hilarious fight scene.

The play is rooted in the *comedian dell'arte* tradition, defined as stock characters placed into increasingly bizarre situations until the audience is watching the equivalent of a "live-action cartoon." Or, as the programme suggests, it's a "shagged up ... romp of a play," and, as such, it lives up to its own notices.

The ensemble cast of seven performs a variety of roles—classic stereotypes such as the old rich lecher, the nagging mother, the *femme fatale* widow who has run out of fingers for wedding rings, the loyal servant, etc. Evan Mercer is Yaffle, the well-intentioned wood-cutter/doctor. Mercer has proven himself in this sort of role in the past (notably as Truffaldino in *The Servant of Two Masters*, 2019), and his performance is a blaze of non-stop comic energy. The lovers, Lucille (Claire Dornan) and Valerie (Blake Pyne) face the usual objection: a father, the Count (Patrick Foran) who disapproves of everything about the young man pursuing his daughter, especially his no account bank account. Phonse (Owen Carter) is the loyal servant, most of whose troubles originate from trying to be loyal to everybody—even when their interests clash. Amanda-Lynn (Sarah Conway) is the traditional servant in support of Lucille who also provides a thematic pointer in falling for Yaffle for himself and not for anything he might pretend to be. Verandah (Selina Asgar) is the Merry Murdering Widow, and Michael Nolan is everybody else (especially wonderful as Mudder), performing a couple of quick changes toward the ending that have to be heard. Rounding out the company are Nicole Hand and Jodee Richardson as musicians who provide a cartoon-like soundtrack to the action (incorporating a number of pop-culture allusions) and, occasionally, engage in it. All of this takes place on a marvellously flexible set designed superbly by Aurora Judge, with entrances and exits *everywhere*.

The timing, particularly of the many interruptions of speech, is excellent. The "runaway train" effect of the plot is, perhaps, better (logically so) in the second act, but the performance does not lag.

Perhaps it is foolish to speak of a 'moral' in such a play, but there is, early in second half, a meditation of Yaffle's that applies outside the limited world of the play. He observes that a doctor is always a mixture of two extremes, a being who provokes both trust and fear in the patient. It is the situation of anyone who tries to do anything to improve a tense or complex situation. The "Flying" part of the

title refers to the stage machinery often used to move the “doctor” character between stage levels; most of us, no matter how well-intentioned, don’t have *deus ex machina* capacities. Similarly, the show reminds us that being a fraud is exhausting work, and “the best thing to be is yourself.”

The Flying Doctor continues in the new home of Perchance Theatre, Conception Harbour, until 26 August. It’s well worth the trip.