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(Noir)

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Sugar Plum Fairy, P.I.

Dashiell Hammett's classic The Maltese Falcon is the last word in detective stories, particularly the genre of Noir. Sorry...(Noir), as it's often whispered by everyone in the cast of SUGAR PLUM FAIRY, P.I. "Noir," which literally means "black" in French, refers to a gritty, cynical style of 1930's crime drama, film or storytelling. It's often marked by stark lighting, moral ambiguity and a bleak worldview in plays and movies.

Lifeline ensemble member Aly Amidei has adapted Hammett's detective tale, The Maltese Falcon, into a noir fairytale mystery. SUGAR PLUM FAIRY, P.I. is currently enjoying its World Premiere, aimed at children ages 5 and up. But I'm here to tell you that the grownups in the audience loved this play even more than the kids. That's because adults will be quick to get the jokes, puns and broad humor far faster than the kids.



The 60-minute comic mystery is set in Storybook Land. The Sugar Plum Fairy P.I. is actually a tough, hard-nosed detective who was once a ballet dancer in "The Nutcracker." Sam Sugarplum is a dead ringer for Dashiell Hammett's famed private investigator, Sam Spade. Humorously, as a gumshoe, the sleuth often has to stop narrating his story to literally scrape the gum from his shoe. After his partner, Humpty Dumpty, survives a murder attempt when he's pushed off a wall, Sam gets pulled into a twisted web of deceit. Sam is hired by the lovely and mysterious fairy, Ms. Mary Belle, to find the missing statue of a small black sheep. What's the reason that she's so determined to retrieve the little lamb, Sam wonders. Soon the famous shamus finds himself embroiled in the darkness of the shady Candy Prohibition (a term that parents will probably need to explain to their children). Amidei's comedy very cleverly blends the noteworthy noir detective drama with several beloved characters from fairy tales and nursery rhymes. The more clever kids will appreciate the comedy.

Nicely directed by ensemble member member, Robert Kauzlaric, the production features a simple, but inventive scenic and property design by Bobby Buie. Talented lighting designer Diane Fairchild has captured the stark contrast between light and shadow that is the signature visual look of noir films that the grownups will appreciate. And Aly Amidei has done double duty as costume designer for the play. He's not only created every crackerjack fairy tale-inspired piece of attire, but the outfits can be easily changed backstage, so that four of the five actors are able to quickly transform into different characters. And Amidei's costumes are whimsical, colorful and pay homage to both childhood bedtime stories and Dashiel Hammet's gritty detective tales.

As always at Lifeline Theatre, the cast of this comedy for young audiences is impeccable. Lifeline ensemble member

Anthony Kayer, has been an audience favorite for nine years. Here he's absolutely spot-on as detective Sam Sugarplum. The talented actor brings a lot of laughs with his deadpan line delivery and over-the-top reactions to the other characters and plot twists. Making his Lifeline debut is the adept Jermaine Jenkins. Previously seen in TOPDOG/UNDERDOG at Gift Theatre, Mr. Jenkins has fun portraying Little Boy Blue (the CandyLand cop), as well as Pinocchio and the mysterious Thursby Shadow. Also making her Lifeline debut is the lovely and eloquent Cris King, in the dual roles of Goldilocks (Sam's Gal Friday) and Candace, the seductive Candy Witch. I've enjoyed King in DRACULA: A COMEDY OF TERRORS, with Lazy Susan Theatre, and in YO HO, at Babes With Blades. I only wish she'd been given two contrasting wigs for her different characters, so that theatergoers would more easily understand that she's portraying two separate women.



Two more talented actors make their Lifeline debuts in this play. Christin Prince is a true delight as fluttering fairy, Ms. Mary Belle. She also plays a familiar candy-obsessed kid named Gretel. I loved Christin in these roles, but I've also enjoyed her in A Red Orchid Theatre' production of VEAL. And Daniel Rivera finally gets to tread the boards at Lifeline Theatre. He plays the multiple roles of Humpty Dumpty (precisely padded like an egg), Gretel's young sugar addict brother, Hansel, and the controversial mayoral candidate of CandyLand, Peter Pan. The talented Mr. Rivera was also seen in THE TEMPEST with the Shakespeare Project of Chicago.

As an excellent companion activity to enhance this delightful, new comedy, Lifeline Theatre is offering a program that follows each performance. It's called "Stories Come Alive," a fun, interactive workshop conducted by their talented teaching artists. The playful program will help children expand their appreciation of the play, spark their imaginations, build confidence and help them to experience the joy of creating theatre. Although SUGAR PLUM FAIRY, P.I. offers comedy that seems primarily aimed at the parents, Lifeline's new one-act is an enjoyable entertainment that young audiences will love. Adapted by Aly Amidei and directed by Robert Kauzlaric, the comedy cleverly blends the noir mystery genre with nursery rhymes, fairy tales and creative fantasy and fun.

Highly Recommended

Reviewed by Colin Douglas

Presented October 3-November 8 by Lifeline Theatre, 6912 N. Glenwood Ave., Chicago.

Tickets are available in person at the box office, by calling the box office at 773-761-4477 or by going to www.lifelinetheatre.com.

Additional information about this and other area productions can be found by visiting www.theatreinchicago.com.

Photos by Josh Bernaski