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2-5-2021

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Recommended Citation

Zodrow, Andru, "'Something Rotten,' a Fresh and Witty Musical" (2021). *The Spectator Online*. 184.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/184>

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“Something Rotten,” a Fresh and Witty Musical

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

If there is one phenomenon that has killed the enjoyment of theater for young people for generations, it is reading Shakespeare. To be clear, this humble columnist loves the Bard and is currently typing on a laptop propped up by his collected works, but forcing an eighth grader to read “Othello” is not a great gateway into Shakespearean drama. “Something Rotten,” the 2015 musical written by brothers Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick along with collaborator John O’Farrell, makes Shakespeare fun with some ridiculous historical fiction.

The show depicts struggling playwright Nick Bottom attempting to create a hit to prove that he is just as talented as his former acting troupe peer, William Shakespeare. “God, I hate Shakespeare” is a hilarious track—one that highlights the most common complaints levelled at Britain’s greatest playwright. The song also reveals a significant tone for the rest of the musical to those who are watching. The show combines low brow humor (the line “don’t be a penis, the man is a genius” might be the best in the whole play) with sharp, witty dialogue.

Bottom consults a soothsayer to show him the future so that he can create a play he knows will be a hit. The soothsayer’s song “A Musical” is the best of the entire show, packed with dramatic references as desperately related as Oedipus Rex and Annie. Bottom explains why he thinks the musical format is stupid, and, as the show is a musical, does it while singing and dancing. This is precisely the kind of ironic humor that makes “Something Rotten” so fresh.

The script provides an opportunity to highlight several talented performers. Indeed, a high level of technical proficiency is required for the majority of the track list. “Right Hand Man,” easily one of the best empowerment jams of the 2010s, demands that the actress depicting Bea Bottom (Nick’s wife) hit high and low notes in succession. The choreography of the show also means that the more mobile characters, such as Shakespeare and the Soothsayer, must be furiously dancing while singing. This is not merely the sign of a talented actor, but an athletic performer.

For anyone who loves theater, “Something Rotten” is rich with brilliant references to plays in Shakespeare’s cannon, as well as some of the most popular musicals of the 20th century. Some musicals are great because they bring something new to the table. “Something Rotten” is innovative precisely because it parodies a perfectly standard musical. The man wants fulfillment as an artist, the wife wants to be empowered within the family unit, and the young lover wants to love—the archetypes are all here. What makes them great is that the play knows what style it is emulating, and mocks it relentlessly.



Bottom hopes to steal Shakespeare's greatest play. When the soothsayer looks into the future, he thinks the drama is called "Omelete." What follows is an attempt to build a musical around a misreading of "Hamlet," which features eggs and several references to the show "Cats." The musical manages to balance reverence for the medium, which the writers of "Something Rotten" clearly love, along with layers of outrageous parody. Often, the love for musicals and mockery occur at the same time. A tap-dance competition between the show's enemies Nick Bottom and Shakespeare is hilariously random, but it is clear that the performers put the time in to make the tapping pristine.

The show does not handle many of the tangible problems of the Renaissance. However, there are a few notable instances in which it nods at the horrific reality of daily life for disenfranchised people living in London during the Elizabethan era.

For example, the character Shylock is a Jewish money lender who funds Nick's new musical. Shylock is a villain from Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice," and is a character who arguably furthers damaging anti-semitic tropes. "Something Rotten" does right by Shylock in pointing out the obvious. Throughout European history, Jews have been systematically discriminated against and were only legally allowed to work in one profession which Christians deemed morally impure: the lending of money with interest. "Something Rotten" occupies a nuanced position of appreciating the best of Shakespeare and the Renaissance while hitting back at the injustices propagated by them. For this reason alone, it is a great musical.

The show is a comedy, so it would be pointless to give away all of the great jokes—it is worth listening to the cast album or finding official recordings of songs from the play online. "Something Rotten" should also be of particular interest to Seattle theater fans because of its interesting relationship with the city. The musical was initially going to open at the 5th Avenue theater in Seattle, a venue which has featured several instances of shows spending a few months perfecting their show before moving to Broadway. The show ultimately found an early opening in New York and premiered there, but the 5th Avenue theater was nonetheless involved in the process of "Something Rotten" working its way to opening night.

There are more interesting connections to note when thinking about "Something Rotten." For example, the tour of "Something Rotten" featured Rob McClure in the role of Nick Bottom. Just a year later, he came to the 5th Avenue theater to star in the world premiere of the new "Mrs. Doubtfire" musical, which is still waiting to premiere on Broadway due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regardless of the fun disparate regional links of "Something Rotten" to the Emerald City, the show is worth listening to and watching due to the laugh factor alone. It is a highly intelligent play masquerading as a cookie-cutter parody musical—don't let it fool you. Shakespeare hasn't been deconstructed in such an entertaining manner in a long time.