

# 500 Clown's signature pieces still unsafe, sensational

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500 Clown never plays it safe.

Watching the supremely talented Molly Brennan, Adrian Danzig and Paul Kalina teeter atop a rickety scaffold secured by a bit of bungee cord, or wrestle with an intractable table whose leaves threaten to sever their torsos from their lower limbs, you kind of wish they would.

That they don't, makes for some heart-stopping moments in the audacious ensemble's revival of its signature pieces: "500 Clown Macbeth" and the riveting "500 Clown Frankenstein," running in repertory at Steppenwolf's Upstairs Theatre.

The intensely physical shows feature variations on such clownish conventions as the seltzer spray and spit-take (re-imagined in a laughably macabre way); a madcap chase that recalls the Keystone Kops; and nose-tweaking/eye-poking antics straight out of a Three Stooges short. But 500 Clown delivers more than thrills, perilous props and old-school shtick. There's pathos behind the pratfalls, and real drama underscores the well-conceived, broadly comic and carefully choreographed productions. Together it makes for smart, rollicking, highly entertaining theater that distills William Shakespeare's tragedy and Mary Shelley's gothic novel down to their essentials.

The former addresses obsession and ambition, and the lengths people go to secure power (expressed both comically by means of a sight gag involving a giant balloon and gruesomely in blood-soaked frenzy that concludes the play). The latter examines creation, rejection and the unintended consequences of a man's questionable conduct.

Director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig orchestrates the kind of dramatic tension that elevates these clown shows beyond mere fun and games. Some indelible images - funny, scary and unsettling - result. There's the clown reaching for a gleaming crown suspended just out of reach; the dispassionate expression of a usurper preparing to take by force what he believes is rightfully his; a clown staring down her adversary, refusing to play the victim; an obsessed scientist coming unhinged while his bewildered assistant is tormented by regret.

The action unfolds on Dan Reilly's no-frills sets, which Ben Wilhelm bathes in moody red ("Macbeth") and harsh white ("Frankenstein"). Tatjana Radisic's tattered 19th century finery featuring clown-inspired accents (Kalina's mismatched socks, Danzig's curly-toed shoes and Brennan's towering bonnet) also deserve mention.

It has been three years since 500 Clown last executed the Scottish play and wrestled the monster here in Chicago. And while the company debuted its refreshingly subversive holiday show - now an annual event - in 2005, it will be at least 2008 before they premiere their next show inspired by Bertolt Brecht's "A Man's A Man." 'Till then, we have the revivals: unsafe and still stimulating.