

# It's a grand show — this crazy comedy revue

Performances of the musical "El Grande de Coca-Cola" continue at 8:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays and 8:30 p.m. Sundays through June 16 at the Actors Alliance Theatre Company in Southfield. For ticket information call 642-1326.

By Cathie Breidenbach  
special writer

"El Grande de Coca-Cola" at the Actors Alliance Theatre is so outrageously funny that all the muscles charged with lifting a face in laughter come away exhausted.

The show, written by the team of Ron House, John Neville-Andrews, Alan Sherman, Diz White and Sally Willis, isn't really a play at all but more a nutty comedy revue, and it's spoken in platin Spanish with a smattering of massacred French and German.

It couldn't matter less if you don't speak any of the languages because the humor communicates in spite of (and because of) the atrocious things the actors do with the words. If you can't imagine a fat, middle-aged entertainer from Honduras reciting Hamlet's "to be" speech in bastard Spanish and next telling "knock knock" jokes (still in Spanish), then impersonating W.C. Fields, Jimmy Cagney and Dirty Harry, you've got to see Jonathan Round's masterful portrayal of the third-rate impresario, Senor Don Pepe Hernandez.

Plot doesn't matter much more than language does in "El Grande." What there is of it provides an excuse for the shenanigans on stage at a nightclub in Tujillo, Honduras, which Pepe Hernandez has persuaded his uncle to rent for a month.

THE UNCLE owns the local Coca-Cola bottling plant, hence the title of the play and the campy ads

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from the sponsor that pepper the already spicy vaudeville farce. Pepe has bragged all over town that he's bringing famous international stars to Tujillo to play at the nightclub.

Some stars! All except the piano player are Pepe's stagestruck relatives who act the parts of cabaret performers from across the sea.

There's his daughter, Maria, a ripe little chickadee in a halter top who loves to heat things up backstage with any available male and to giggle delightfully all the while she's doing it. Anita Barone is marvelous as Maria.

Consuela Hernandez (Maggie Wysocki) does a fine job as Pepe's vampish stepdaughter, who is Maria's rival. In their first act, the two come on like Carmen Miranda (twins doing a Beechout gum ad, but definitely minus the sisterly sweetness).

They swing their arms and hips trying to knock each other off stage and all the while they manage to balance giant pyramids of plastic fruit on their heads.

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and a decided flair for comedy. His portrayal of the short-legged painter, Toulouse-Lautrec, is the funniest part in the play, thanks to inspired costumes by Mary Ellen Shindel. He acts the whole skit (if you call his melodramatic nonsense acting) wearing sponge rubber feet taped to his knees so he can hobble around like a dwarf. Sound stupid? It is — masterfully so.

Costuming for the Wagnerian diva is nearly as outrageous. She wears twin coconuts glued to her breastplate and uses them as weapons. And of course, since she is a diva in the French skit, she wears a beret with the requisite Wagnerian horns attached — only the horns are knocked askew and quiver absurdly.

In "El Grande" the style is decidedly slapstick. Bimbos get kicked in the backside and sprawl on stage, and everyone races around like hyped-up stooges. The cast under Annette Madras' expert direction is so good at its hijinks that even those in the audience resistant to slapstick will break down and howl.

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