

## Globe and Mail Review

### Grim and Fischer: Having a ball with masks

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An amazing thing happens when watching a performance of Grim and Fischer, a compelling play in which the actors appear in full face masks: You could swear their expressions – in particular Mrs. Fischer’s – change. As she experiences terror, annoyance, joy, nostalgia or love, the mask – an extraordinary piece of work in itself – appears to transform with her. It doesn’t move one iota, of course, but that doesn’t mean that we in the audience aren’t moved.

Mrs. Fischer (Kate Braidwood) is an elderly widow who spends the bulk of her time in her unit at an assisted-living facility, watching TV and reading the paper. It may not sound like much of a life, but when the Grim Reaper (Andrew Phoenix) comes calling, Mrs. Fischer is not ready for him. She puts up a fight, outsmarting him repeatedly with the mere assistance of her wits and the odd accessory, such as a bathroom scale.

All this is conveyed wordlessly, with a bare-bones set and few props. The story of this (sometimes literal) dance with death comes alive – and it really does – thanks to an ingenious script, extraordinary physicality on the part of the players, and a rich soundtrack that incorporates everything from Eye of the Tiger to a whoopee cushion.

The character development is remarkable. Mrs. Fischer is a portrait of grace and spirit: a strong but playful woman who loved her husband and misses him dearly, but still has some romance left in her. Grim may not be as grim, as it turns out, as his career choice would suggest. (A third character, a care-home employee also played by Phoenix, is not as well drawn, but offers further comic relief.) Without any words or facial expressions to offer us clues, it is amazing how well we get to know them.

The work was created by Braidwood and Phoenix in 2009, the same year they formed their theatre company, Wonderheads, in Portland, Ore. Braidwood, who was born and raised in the Vancouver area, designed the masks.

The show has been winning over audiences on the Fringe circuit, and won the Cultchivating the Fringe Award at the Vancouver International Fringe Festival in 2011. “Grim and Fischer was our total, absolutely, crazy favourite,” said Cultch executive director Heather Redfern before opening night this week. (She also announced that the production was being sponsored by a funeral home, Dignity Memorial.)

I saw Grim and Fischer at the Fringe that year, and was also struck by its sheer inventiveness, its out-of-the-box creativity, its whimsy, its heart – and the fact that it never gushed over into sentimentality. I have thought about it often since. That’s a lot more than I can say for many big-budget productions.

Thursday night’s performance was virtually the same as the Fringe show (although, ironically, in a more intimate venue). Opening night – there were no previews – saw a few minor bumps with sound cues and lighting. But it still struck a chord.

Running 50 minutes, this is but a little taste of the magic theatre can create. It is powerful, surprising, and, yes, moving.