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Slapstick comedy livens up Lovett's 'Paganini'

By Kitty Landholt | Thresher staff

Put together a drunken drag-queen prostitute, three fake orgasms and four women prancing around in lacy lingerie and you have Lovett College's spring theater production, *Paganini*. Director Adriana Ramirez, a Lovett senior, takes her audience on what she deems 'a Faustian journey into the soul of Paganini.' Playwright Don Nigro skillfully uses fast-paced physical comedy and absurd farce to pull the audience into the tortured and diseased inner life of one of the world's greatest violinists in a bawdy comedy.

Paganini, based on the life of musician Nicolo Paganini, weaves testimonials from characters who knew him with his own thoughts and experiences. In real life, Paganini was born with a musculoskeletal condition that weakened the connective tissue in his hands and wrists, making them abnormally flexible. Because of his condition and the rigorous training his father gave him from a young age, Paganini became a violinist capable of performing amazing technical feats. Early 19th-century audiences attributed his superhuman talent to a deal with the devil and spread rumors that they saw the devil helping him during performances.

Nigro's play examines this supernatural aspect of Paganini's career and its impact on his personal life and habits. Throughout the play, the audience watches Paganini struggle with rumors about his personal life and his possible pact with Satan. He hallucinates and has torturous dreams throughout the play, which intensify as the line between reality and his imagined world blurs. To emphasize the confusion between subconscious and conscious, costume designer Amanda Anglin, a Lovett junior, and set designer Ramirez create a surreal atmosphere by building a black set and using mostly black-and-white costumes.

Despite the heady material in *Paganini*, Nigro successfully uses dark, fast-paced and often physical comedy to emphasize the maddeningly hectic life of the violinist at the height of his career.

This ensemble piece depends on the cast of 12 actors ? who play a total of 40 roles ? to elucidate this delirious confusion and manic frenzy. Lovett senior Nick Stephens expertly portrays a variety of Paganini's violent moods, ranging from the womanizing cavalier to the drunken gambler to the lost soul seeking redemption. His dramatic interpretation of Paganini's character does justice to the psychologically intriguing script.

The most important figure in Paganini's life is the violin salesman, who he associates with Satan. Lovett Resident Associate Rick Spuler exudes a wisdom and savvy that suit the character. Spuler also portrays other characters in the play ? one of whom sleeps with Paganini's mistress, driving Paganini into a murderous rage. All of Spuler's characters have a paradoxical relationship with Paganini, acting as both antagonists and spiritual guides. The onstage chemistry between Spuler and Stephens thrives on this tension.

Another important figure in Paganini's quest is a recurring old woman, portrayed by the entertaining Jackie Kirby, a Lovett

sophomore. Kirby's performance as the batty old apple-seller alludes to the witches of Macbeth and the apple-peddling witch from Snow White. The ghosts of Paganini's dead lovers, played by Lovett sophomore Aparna Shewakramani, Lovett sophomore Jacki Craig, Hanszen College sophomore Kelsey Flynt and Lovett freshman Annie Conderacci, act as more torturous psychological demons, teasing Paganini through hallucinations and attempting to convince him that his soul is Satan's property. All four actresses play the part of lingerie-clad vixen superbly.

On the whole, Lovett's troupe confronted a daunting theatrical challenge ? producing a play that is as humorously entertaining as it is philosophically and psychologically intriguing ? and succeeded.

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