

Gory days are here again

A chainsaw-wielding Ryan Ward tackles demons in *Evil Dead: The Musical* as Ash, a role originated by Bruce Campbell in the films.

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Evil Dead: The Musical

★★★★(out of 4)

Book and lyrics by George Reinblatt. Music by Frank Cipolla, Christopher Bond, Melissa Morris and George Reinblatt.

Directed by Christopher Bond and Hinton Battle.

Until June 23 at Diesel Playhouse, 56 Blue Jays Way.
416-971-5656

There's something magical that happens in a theatre when the cast and the audience suddenly unite in one giant, swooping arc of emotion and that's what took place in the second act of *Evil Dead: The Musical*, which opened at the Diesel Playhouse last night.

Our hero, Ash, is about to face off for the final time against a horde of Candarian Demons and he gets a gleam in his eye as he picks up his trusty chainsaw.

"It's time to kick some demon ass," he sings and the audience whoop with near-orgasmic glee, because they know the blood is about to start flowing.

Let's make no mistake, this is ultimately why people are going to come to see *Evil Dead: The Musical*, and have a great time doing so: they want a generous dose of comedy carnage and boy, do they get it.

Gore spurts from the walls, from the ceiling, from every chopped-up demon and it sprays with mad abandon into the audience. If you're not in the designated "Splatter Zone", you're supposedly safe, but hey, what's the point of safety at a show like this?

For the record, George Reinblatt's adaptation of Sam Raimi's classic slasher films remains as sublimely silly as it always has, mixing frat boy humour and sly cinematic parody in equal doses.

Once I tell you that five horny college kids go off to a deserted mountain cottage for spring break, you don't need to know any more, do you? Of course, a crew of bloodthirsty monsters are going to wreck their plans for feckless fornication and do so in the most gruesome ways possible.

There's something deeply satisfying in the way that every last person breaks into a song called "Look Who's Evil Now" when they join the undead and it's equally hilarious when our two jock heroes greet the realization that their girlfriends have gone zombie with a number entitled "What the F-k?"

Yes, the potty-mouth brigade is out in full force and this isn't the show to which you should take those easily shocked by sexual innuendo. ("That's not the kind of head I thought I'd be getting from you this weekend," says the hero to his girlfriend after he's been forced to decapitate her.)

But for just about everyone else, it's good, clean, dirty fun: hilariously bloody and bloody hilarious.

Mercifully, Ryan Ward plays Ash as he has in every production since the show started in 2003. His deadpan comedy timing, boundless energy and physical agility are what this show needs to make it fly.

There's also some wonderful redneck humour from Mike "Nug" Nahrgang as "Good Old Reliable Jake" and Matt Olmstead's Scott is the most superbly funny sexist pig you've ever encountered.

Tara Macri does the sweet-girlfriend thing nicely enough, but it's hard to be the one straight arrow on a stage full of boomerangs.

The absolutely funniest performance of the night (and maybe of the season) is Sarah Cornell, doubling the trampy Shelly and the brainy Annie. Cornell knows how to nail both parts perfectly and manages the rare trick of appearing to be sexy but making fun of sex at the same time. Marilyn Monroe could do it; so can Cornell.

Christopher Bond and Hinton Battle have co-directed with inventive glee and Battle's choreography, especially in the show-stopping number "Do the Necronomicon", is a joy throughout.

The same kudos apply to David Gallo's prodigiously imaginative set and the blessedly lurid lighting of Jason Lyons.

In the midst of all this mirth, a couple of small flaws intrude. The sound design of Kevin Lacy is one more victim to the Diesel's tricky acoustics and too many of Reinblatt's witty lyrics get lost.

And as the shrill, pun-loving sister of our hero, Rachel Fischer just isn't as funny as other women I've seen in the role and her repeated appearances soon become tiresome.

Still, nothing can dispel the glee that fills the room when Ryan Ward picks up his chainsaw and swings into action. It might be the closest thing to classical catharsis available on our stage today and it certainly makes for one hell of a fun night out at the theatre.

I found myself thinking of the first performance of *Evil Dead: The Musical* that I saw at the Tranzac Club back in 2003. Some of the people involved are the same and a lot are different.

But they all played an important part in bringing this show to the place it is today and we owe each and every one of them our thanks.