

ARTS & CULTURE

Theater

Incorruptible is a dark farce at Silver Spring Stage



PHOTOS BY NEIL EDGELL

A scene from *Incorruptible* at Silver Spring Stage

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

The Dark Ages in Europe. Not the greatest period of human history. It was an era of superstition and plagues and abject poverty and the occasional flare-up of religious fanaticism. All in all, not a time period you would use for a comedy.

Fortunately, no one told that to playwright Michael Hollinger. *Incorruptible* is a smart, sassy and very dark comedy set in the Dark Ages. The Author's Note in the playbill that "this sort of thing really happened" gives one pause, but Hollinger plays it as broad farce and the fine cast at Silver Spring Stage play right along with it in this hilarious production.

We are in a poor monastery in Priseaux, France where the relics of St. Foy have not been doing their saintly thing. Namely, there have been no miracles by St. Foy in over a dozen years and both the villagers and the monastery itself have fallen on hard times. When another

monastery claims to have St. Foy's bones and they are performing miracles, a very unholy war begins.

Without giving too much away, let's just say the monks at Priseaux find the religious relics business a very good business indeed. Let's also say that as a romantic intrigue starts to play itself out, one character learns to play very still. Plus the battle between these two monasteries goes well beyond pure business – let's just say it runs in the family. It all adds up to a situation where multiple plot lines converge and things get funnier – and more outlandish – as we proceed.

This is the type of play that takes a very careful touch – it is easy to make the work too dark or not cynical enough to be funny. Director Leta Hall keeps the pace moving swiftly and keeps the mood at the right temperature throughout.

We quickly learn that all medieval monks are not alike. Craig Miller is very good as Brother Martin, who is all business and does not let too many scruples get in the way of being successful. Ted Schneider as Abbot Charles is more conflicted about the path to take. Set against them are Vincent Rowe and John Strange as younger and less cynical monks with a purer faith, although one has a secret.

Then there are the peasants from the outside world – the minstrel team

of Robin Covington as the saucy Marie and Jose Guzman as a rather poor minstrel but a mastermind of the relic business. Their wonderfully dismal minstrel act is a highlight of the first act, while Guzman's efforts to get Marie into the monastery for less than truly holy reason sets off a comic chain of misadventures in the second half.

Kathie Mack is good as a constantly commenting peasant woman (and Marie's mother) while everyone gets pushed to the side when Sally Cusenza enters as a very upset and fuming Abbess Agatha. The Abbess is mentioned throughout the play, making this one long delayed entrance, but even though it is only one scene, Cusenza makes it a wildly memorable one.

This is broad farce but not totally off the mark. One historian estimated that there were enough pieces of the True Cross floating around Europe in the Middle Ages to build Noah's Ark. Amid all the humorous situations and catty one liners, playwright Hollinger quietly slips in a few intriguing questions. In an age without miracles, is it OK to manufacture your own. And in an age without faith, do the smaller miracles count that much more.

Incorruptible continues at Silver Spring Stage through Aug. 3. For more information, call 301-593-6036 or go online to www.ssstage.org.

Book Review

Little House on the Prairie

by Laura Ingalls Wilder, performed by Cherry Jones, fiddle performance by Paul Woodiel

By Terri Schlichenmeyer
Sentinel Book Reviewer

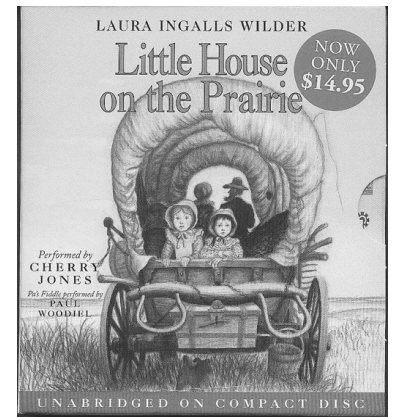
Has your family ever moved?

Even if they haven't, you know the drill. Your bed is taken apart, your clothes come out of the closet and your stuff comes off the wall. All your belongings, including your favorite toys and books, are put in a box until you get to your new home.

Now imagine putting all your stuff in the back of a wagon and moving to a place where there are no roads, no electricity and no grocery stores. That's what Laura Ingalls Wilder's family did and in the audiobook *Little House on the Prairie* (narrated by Cherry Jones), you'll hear about Ingalls' adventures.

The Big Woods was getting crowded. Too many people and too many horses went past the house while Laura and her sister Mary were playing outdoors. Pa Ingalls decided that it was time to leave, so he hitched up the horses, piled everything into the covered wagon and put Ma up front. He put Laura, Mary and baby Carrie in back and they headed from Wisconsin through Minnesota

pendence, Mo., in the middle of the prairie with sky as far as the eye could see, the Ingalls' wagon stopped. In that quiet spot, there was water for the horses, Pet and Patty. There was plenty of food for Pa to catch. In the winter, there would be fur to trap for warm clothing and when spring came, there'd be room for a garden. Happy with his spot on



the prairie, Pa cut some trees for logs and built a cabin for the family to live in.

There was always something fun to do on the prairie. Laura and Mary spent long days spying on bullfrogs, rabbits and snakes and playing with Jack the bulldog and Bunny the mule. Ma often needed help with interesting chores. In the evening, Pa always played his fiddle and sang.

But there was danger on the prairie, too. Indians weren't always friendly but they were definitely scary. Fire, wind and high water were a concern. And who knew if Santa could find one little house in the middle of a big field when Christmas came?

Remember how much you loved the TV adventures of Laura Ingalls and her family? With a new narrator (cowboy hats off to Jones) and an affordable price, now's a good time to re-introduce your kids to this charming series.

But first, a reminder: while there isn't any profanity or anything violent in this exciting and beloved, classic, almost-100-year-old children's book, you should remember that Ingalls wrote with a voice from long ago. That includes her "un-PC" words about Native Americans. While it might have been true to Ingalls, the context of what was written about the 1870s might not be understood by today's kids.

Still, for a 6-to-12-year-old with a good imagination and a longing for the Old West, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better story. At under \$15, *Little House on the Prairie* is an audiobook to move on.

There was always something fun to do on the prairie. Laura and Mary spent long days spying on bullfrogs, rabbits and snakes and playing with Jack the bulldog and Bunny the mule. Ma often needed help with interesting chores. In the evening, Pa always played his fiddle and sang.

and Iowa into Kansas.

Roughly 40 miles from Inde-

Incorruptible

★★★

Silver Spring Stage