

Wingfield goes down in flames

Despite actor Rod Beattie's outstanding performance, a lacklustre script made *Wingfield's Inferno* crash and burn, leaving audiences with nothing but ashes

Wingfield's Inferno

Written by Dan Needles
Directed by Douglas Beattie
Starring Rod Beattie
Runs until 28 January
Citadel Theatre

MATT FREHNER
Editor-in-Chief

As his legs turn to Jell-O in horse-tranquilizer-induced fit, it becomes clear that Rod Beattie is a master of physical comedy. Unfortunately for the viewers of *Wingfield's Inferno*, though, Beattie's jelly appendages and his schizophrenic ability to carry on a conversation between four characters at once is just not enough to redeem the play's tired script.

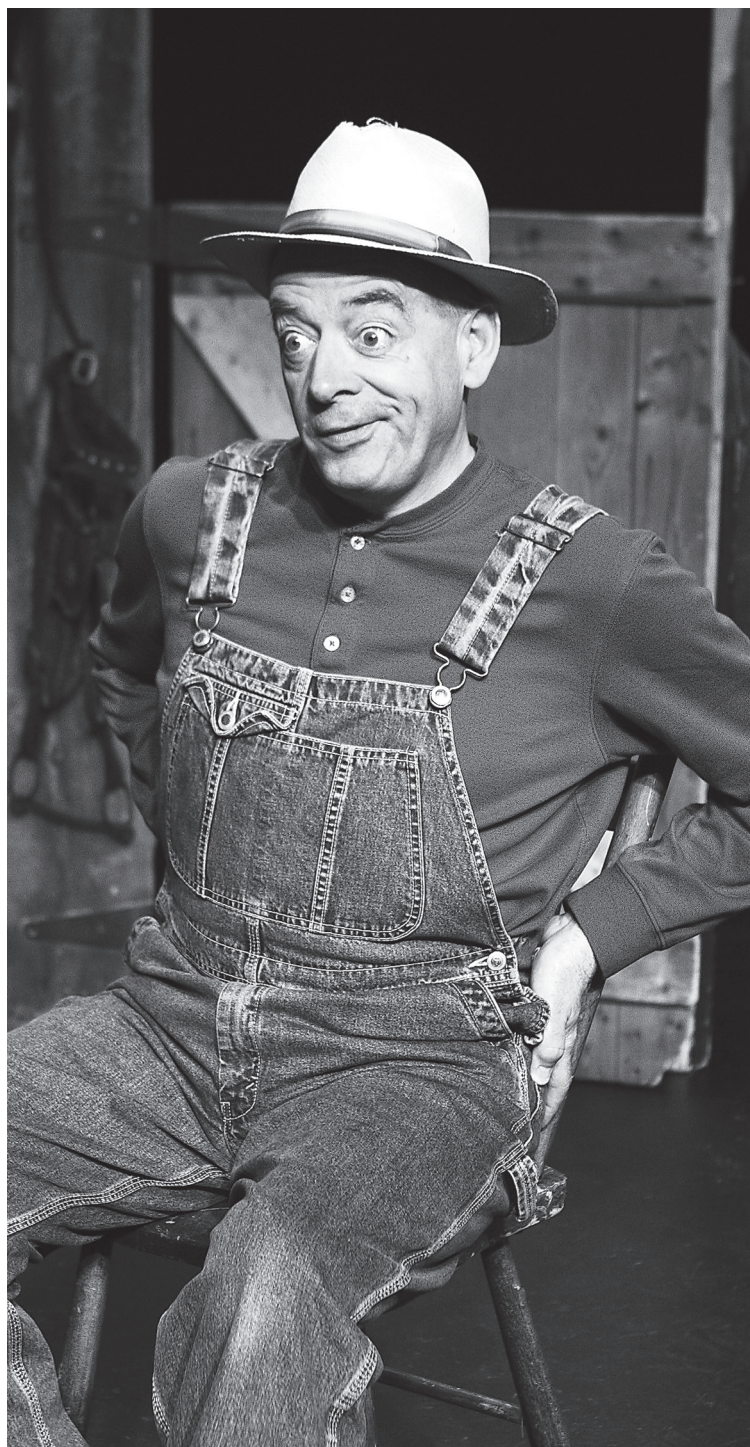
The sixth installment in Beattie's *Wingfield* series, still ongoing after 20 years, *Inferno* follows the bungling adventures of Walt Wingfield, a Toronto stockbroker turned hobby farmer. Stories are told through Walt's letters to an old friend, which allows Beattie to play out snippets of each character he encounters. In particular, *Inferno* tells the tale of how the inhabitants of Persephone Township combine small-town ingenuity with light fraud in order to rebuild a town landmark.

The simple plot is largely an excuse to explore a string of personalities and their misadventures; accordingly, the first act drags somewhat, as characters are woven into the slowly expanding story. In contrast, the second act flies by as the plot builds to an entertaining, if predictable, climax.

Dan Needles' script is filled with cheesy, cutesy humour—the kind of innocuous prairie wit that's quintessentially Canadian. They're in line with the jokes fathers tell—half with irony, we hope—that make children roll their eyes and shift awkwardly. Concerned neighbours discuss the pitfalls of personal insurance; a man ingests an egg injected with horse tranquilizer. Part tall-tale, part genuine prairie portrait, don't expect a biting lament of the plight of the small-town farmer or a romantic treatise on the hardship of taming the Wild West.

It's the kind of writing that, though not entirely without merit, is usually found in community theatre: good, clean fun for the whole family, and guaranteed to please Grandma and Grandpa. Needles' characters are genuine in the lifestyles they represent, but lack the ability to progress beyond their stereotype.

The play is redeemed wholly by Beattie's performance. He acts out a dozen gregarious characters, filling the sparse set with sincere anecdotes



and dynamic conversation. Each role is entirely distinct both physically and vocally. Beattie shifts effortlessly from stuttering farmer to out-of-touch rural MP, from silky-voiced wife to stern doctor. It's a flawless and unique performance, and it's a shame the script doesn't display the characters' full depth.

Beattie's tour-de-force is supported by a clean, simple design. A simple homestead gives *Wingfield* plenty of playing room for his characters without encumbering the performance, and Shelia Cleasby's lighting remains simple and understated until needed.

Despite all this, *Inferno* fails to offer anything of substance beyond quirky characters in a typical prairie setting. In isolation, each anecdote

is impeccably crafted and entertaining enough, but the piece as a whole doesn't draw in the audience; however accurate the portrayal may be, there's nothing to commit to, nothing to fall in love with, save the spectacle of Beattie's performance and the caricatures he draws.

Wingfield's Inferno boasts some genuinely charming moments, no doubt, but they always fail to say anything of consequence. We end up watching with feigned interest as each character plays out their particular part without surprise, intrigue, or deviation from the type they're meant to represent. In the end, Beattie's schizophrenic acrobatics aren't enough to dilute the mind-numbing effect of *Inferno's* script.

Instantly recognizable, and yet entirely new: this is the best way one can describe the new record *Let's Frolic* from country-rock group Blackie and the Rodeo Kings.

For those who haven't heard of Blackie and the Rodeo Kings, they consist of three relatively successful Canadians. Stephen Fearin and Colin Linden play guitar and provide backup vocals to the distinctive stylings of Tom Wilson, while the rest of the album fleshed out by friends of the group. Although each core member has several solo albums to his name, don't expect *Let's Frolic* to sound too much like them; instead, the band brings their differing tastes in songwriting together to give us a wide-

ranging and highly enjoyable sound.

Although there's nothing earth-shattering about it, *Let's Frolic* manages to go from a heartbreaking country ballad in "Crown Of Thorns" to blues in "I Give It Up Everyday." For those who can't resist the country twang of a guitar, there are even some danceable songs. *Let's Frolic* is almost a side project for Blackie and the Rodeo Kings, but the chemistry of the act is undeniable. Far too much of this genre is clouded by songs about riding a cowboy, so it's nice to listen to an album that has a bit more to say. It's a record that could be at home in a country pub or a rocking blues club, and hey, maybe in your CD player too.



Blackie and the Rodeo Kings

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