



Zombies Calling puts university twist on the undead

bookpreview

Zombies Calling

Available 15 November

Written and illustrated by Faith Erin Hicks

Published by Slave Labour Graphics

TYSON DURST

Arts & Entertainment Staff

Zombies may be sighted roaming the streets this Halloween, but come November, comic shops will still find some undead corpses lurking among their shelves in *Zombies Calling*, a new graphic novel by Canadian comic creator Faith Erin Hicks.

Zombies Calling will be made available through Slave Labor Graphics, a longtime independent publisher that has garnered a reputation for offbeat material that appeals to audiences beyond the stereotypical "Comic Book Guy" made famous on *The Simpsons*. Such stereotypes often

presented a deterrent to reading comics for the 28-year-old artist when she was growing up in Ontario.

"I actually didn't read a lot of comics when I was a kid, and it was exactly for that reason: because I was terrified of comic book stores," explains Hicks, who now resides in Halifax.

Thankfully, she managed to get over her fears and is now putting out her first graphic novel. Set at an unnamed Canadian university, *Zombies Calling* features a 20-something main character named Joss, who, along with her roommates, finds herself facing a zombie outbreak that has nothing to do with students shuffling to early-morning classes.

Along with the brain-eating chaos and references to "The Rules" of any generic zombie rampage, Joss also finds time to lament the burden of her student loan debt and pending exam crunches. For the reader, *Zombies Calling* is a fun, light-hearted read that's easily accessible, and the characters will certainly have a special appeal for students picking up

the book.

"I did the postsecondary thing, and I did university, and then I went to Sheridan College to do a degree in animation, and I have a friend who graduated ten years before me at Sheridan—I graduated in 2004, and he graduated in 1994.

"When he went to Sheridan, he was paying \$1000 a year for his tuition; I paid \$7000 a year. So, in ten years, the tuition went up 700 per cent. And he graduated when animation was at its height, so he went and worked for Dreamworks; I work on crappy Flash animation and barely get by," Hicks laughs.

While *Zombies Calling* is the first print graphic novel for Hicks, she cites the Internet as a useful training ground for developing her artistic skills.

"I've done a ton of online comics. I kind of taught myself how to draw doing online comics. I did one called *Demonology 101*, which started out as a kind of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* ripoff."

Some slayer-versed readers may

wonder if the name "Joss" in *Zombie Calling* refers to *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon; it's purely coincidental according to the author.

"Honestly, it really wasn't meant to be [a reference to Whedon]. It's short for Jocelyn. If people want to think that though, that's fine. If I had his home address, I'd send him a few copies," Hicks jokes.

The main trio that the story centers around will instantly strike readers as people they'd recognize around campus, but Hicks says that none of the characters are based on anyone in particular in her life.

"I don't tend to base characters off of people that I know—maybe little bits here and there, but I'm always worried that I'll offend them if I do. But Bill Watterson who did *Calvin and Hobbes* once said that every character you create is half of you."

Zombies Calling draws much of its inspiration from the worlds of fiction and nearly every silly action cliché. Whether

it's found in movies, TV, or comics, expect it to be rearranged in satirical fashion with a solid zombie-kick to the decomposing head.

"I was watching the remake of the *Bionic Woman*, and it was just terrible," Hicks recalls. "She's an ordinary bartender and has no indication of any kind of martial arts training, and then all of a sudden, she's got these bionic limbs, and then she's beating the crap out of Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica*, and I'm just like, 'This woman is a bartender.'

"That was kind of where *Zombies Calling* came from: this ridiculous cliché, like Michael Bay movies like *The Rock*, where Nicholas Cage is supposed to be this nerdy scientist, and then all of a sudden, he's jumping into a Lamborghini and speeding through the streets," she continues. "I mean, how did he learn how to drive a car like that? So, it was meant to be a parody of that kind of thing. It's a ridiculous comic, and I really loved making it."

Almost, Maine almost perfection

theatre review

Almost, Maine

Runs until 4 November

Written by John Cariani

Directed by Coralie Cairns and John Hudson

Starring John Hudson, Coralie Cairns, Jeff Jaslam, and Sharla Matkin

MARIA KOTOVYCH

Arts & Entertainment Staff

Many couples have unique "how we met" stories; however, most of them don't involve someone getting smacked in the face with an ironing board. Similarly, few people meet their soulmate by camping out in a stranger's backyard, yet two couples in Shadow Theatre's charming play *Almost, Maine* meet in these unusual ways.

Performed as a series of loosely interconnected vignettes, *Almost, Maine* depicts nine love-related encounters, all of which take place at the same moment on a Friday night in the small titular community. Each of the four actors plays a different

character in each scene, showing the different ways in which each person or couple experiences love. In some cases, a new relationship begins; for others, an opportunity for romance is lost. More still attempt to rekindle old flames, while some try to walk away from a relationship. Then, just as the northern lights brighten up the sky, the characters suddenly realize something—they experience what *Almost, Maine* refers to as an "aurora moment" about the relationship in question—and then the scene ends.

The play avoids taking a philosophical or overly reflective tone, opting instead for a light-hearted and humorous approach. Depending on what you want from a play about love, you'll either be delighted or disappointed. If you want a good laugh, then this play is for you; with a funny script and likeable characters, the play is sweet without being sappy and cute without triggering a gag reflex.

On the other hand, if you want to see something a bit deeper and thought-provoking, then you'll likely be disappointed by this particular script—although you may still enjoy

the performance itself.

Furthermore, the lighting effects and the set design create an atmosphere that is instantly recognizable to anyone who's lived on the Prairies—cold winter nights in a vast land, complete with northern lights.

The four actors handle their roles very well, bringing huge bundles of energy and enthusiasm into the characters. Their facial expressions, eye movements, and comic timing are absolutely spot-on as the actors remain upbeat and strong throughout the show, coming off as loveable and charming.

In tackling the theme of love, *Almost, Maine* takes a unique approach in portraying clichés—many familiar sayings like "falling in love" are incorporated in a literal sense.

However, despite the unique premise of such an approach, the result is mixed. The interpretation of these clichés is too obvious and shallow. The characters fall, and that's it; there's no afterthought, no further insight or commentary about that cliché. Considering how well the play handles the scene where a character tries to literally return her love



to her boyfriend of eleven years, one knows that playwright John Cariani could have explored the concept of "falling in love" a bit more thoroughly.

As with the shallow take on the love clichés, the play doesn't really delve beneath the surface of some of the characters. In particular, some of the female characters are underwritten, and Cariani misses several good opportunities to delve into

some important topics. One woman mentions that her boyfriend doesn't like her to be gone longer than she'd promised, but oddly enough, the script offers no follow-up to that remark.

Overall, *Almost, Maine* is a delightful and charming play that, despite a few shortcomings, will make audience members laugh and see the warmth in a cold winter night.