



SHE KILLS MONSTERS: VIRTUAL REALMS

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by Scott Wiser

## Theatre UAF slays monsters — and the pandemic stage — with its first virtual performance

The COVID-19 pandemic isolates us from family and friends, and also from the strangers that we regularly meet on stage at the theater.

While we still have to wait a bit longer for live theater to return, it was heartwarming to see so many Fairbanks regulars perform on computer in UAF Theatre and Film’s opening production for the 2020-2021 season, “She Kills Monsters — Virtual Realms,” written by Qui Nguyen. Nguyen updated his 2011 play for the pandemic. The outdated 90’s references have been replaced with more currently outdated references (“Game of Thrones” is sooo 2019). Nguyen also wisely made all the characters of high school age, and the play is better for these updates.

Director Tom Robenolt and company have perfectly blended live theater and film with a video conference platform. What remains is a touching story of working through grief and how a role-playing game can teach us what we didn’t know about lost loved ones. And of course, how cool it is to use magic and kill monsters.

“She Kills Monsters” tells the story of Agnes Evans (Josie Adasiak), a senior cheerleader in Athens, Ohio. She discovers the diary of her recently deceased sister, Tilly Evans (Emily Ross), a self-proclaimed geek.

Within the diary are the instructions for a Dungeons & Dragons scenario to save the lost soul of Athens. DM Biggs (Luke Williams) guides Agnes through this adventure and they are aided by Tilly’s companions, Lilith/ Lilly (Melia Hackney), Kaliope/Kelly (Melissa Buchta) and Orcus/Ronnie (Charles Wolgemuth).

The play blends the role-playing world with Agnes’s real life. Her best friend Vera (Paloma Polanco) and boyfriend Miles (Jared Olin) help support Agnes outside of the D&D universe. Many in the cast play dual roles: A D&D version and their real-life personas, experiencing those terribly embarrassing high school years. All step up to the challenge with standout performances. Hackney’s comfort as fighter demon queen Lilith and awkward Lilly is particularly noteworthy. Williams too is at his best contrasting the confident Dungeon Master with being more socially uncertain when not rolling the dice.

Agnes’s journey is universal. It is the story we must all face when working through an overwhelming loss. Nguyen’s storytelling allows the audience to get into the adventure, have some



laughs, and learn more about the world as Tilly experienced it. We all wish we could have a few more moments with loved ones. What the adventure disguises is the pain felt in accepting that loss. The monsters we kill may be the ones we needed to exist to get us through. This play articulates that battle very well. Adasiak and Ross’s powerful performances remind us how loved ones live on in different ways.

What Robenolt accomplished was to create a true mixed media spectacle. Interspersing digital animation from scenographer/ animation and digital effects designer Kade Mendelowitz during the quest, enhance the connection of the audience to the D & D universe. It also shows how this play is better in this format.

Watching on a computer screen, the audiences feel as if they are part of the adventure. From design to casting to play selection, the company got everything right. They have embraced this new art form and helped to further it. Hopefully, it will be here to stay. The options for staging live theater shows are limitless and it opens up audiences around the world to smaller companies looking to expand their base. UAF Theatre and Film show off what they can do with this strong production.

Whether sitting in the audience at Salisbury Theatre or relaxing on a couch getting clawed by cats, their shows are always great fun. And as Tillius the Paladin states, “That’s the point in all this.”

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“She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms” opens this weekend, streaming online starting Friday.