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## Review: Today's calamities mean fun at Brave New Workshop

By Quinton Skinner  
Special to the Pioneer Press

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While it might be a backhanded sentiment to wish upon another a life in interesting times, for a sketch comedy artist it's an invitation to convert strife and calamity into elusive laughs. In the latest revue from the Brave New Workshop — "Spilling Me Softly; or Once the Gulf Goes Black, It Never Comes Back" — a backdrop of environmental disaster, midterm elections and political tribal divisions is thrown into the pot for a show that has to rank among the best the theater has produced in recent years.

The first act is an innovative, energized, ambitious series of sketches that stop abruptly, change gears and pick up threads later in the action. We have a fractious "tea party" meeting in a local Perkins that fragments over the propriety of breakfast foods at odd hours, followed by a strange skit about gay marriage and bestiality, segueing into the question of whether Tiger Woods needs to resume his philandering in order to recover his lost golf stroke.

This chopped-up story structure serves the cast well and enables them to splice together fragments that may have sagged if delivered all at once. It also represents, at least in the early days of the run, a palpable challenge for all six players — the kind of high wire that drives away complacency and keeps audience and performers in the moment.

Mike Fotis scores as Benjamin Franklin explaining the necessity of the tepid upcoming gubernatorial race, while Bobby Gardner endures having several

beverages thrown into his face by restaurant servers while delivering a self-pitying ballad as Tom Emmer. Ellie Hino continues to refine an unsettling Michele Bachmann impersonation, while Josh Eakright maneuvers an absurd Mexican stereotype while doubling back on a subplot involving him losing himself in character.

This ensemble, along with director Caleb McEwen, has come up with a distinctly fresh take on topical comedy, and it's largely because the actual topics take a back seat to the way they are delivered. By splicing sketches together, they have actually created a work that comments on its own development, trying to find coherence from news saturation and the ridiculously polarized political moment in which we all live.

Indeed, rather than go for a big bang at the end of "Spilling Me Softly," the end of all this controlled chaos comes with a concise and apt appeal for a nation in which all sides acknowledge their differences while earnestly listening to one another and finding common ground. The kicker, of course, is which country we're talking about.

Throw in a devouring animal costume and a pair of ill-advised bicycle shorts, and we're onto something. Without tossing too-obvious Molotov cocktails or throwing red meat to the crowd, the Brave New Workshop has taken care of its business — delivering a near-pitch-perfect show that reflects, and comments, upon where we are.

**What:** Spilling Me Softly; or Once the Gulf Goes Black, It Never Comes Back

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**When:** Through Oct. 30

**Where:** Brave New Workshop, 2605 Hennepin Ave. S., Minneapolis

**Tickets:** \$25-\$29

**Information:** 612-332-6620 or [bravenewworkshop.com/](http://bravenewworkshop.com/)

**Capsule:** This new collection of sketches bravely and energetically does the work of depicting where we are.

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