Off the Beaten Groove

I scream for Beefheart

Ice Cream for Crow. Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band on Virgin/Epic Records.

In 1969, purist critic and full-time MIT professor of political science Langdon Winner wrote a now-classic defense of Captain Beefheart's Trout Mask Replica. The essay (compiled in a collection called Sounded) analyzed Beefheart's seemingly random wall-of-noise approach, showing it to be a very carefully premeditated synthesis of delta blues and free-form jazz with cryptic but decipherable lyrics. Trout Mask still stands as his best work, established Beefheart's reputation as a cult hero.

Beefheart (a.k.a. Don Van Vliet) has retained his cult status for more than ten years, adding more critics to the ranks of the believers and endeavoring himself to rock's current avant-garde artists. Although his following includes many punks, including avant John Lydon, none have been more helpful in boosting the Captain's public image. He remarked the fact in "Astray Heart" (from 1989's Doc at the Radar Station), singing "Break a case of the punks... You need me like an astray heart." Despite the minor success of the lament and the record, arguably his best in years, Beefheart retired to his mobile home in the Arizona desert to paint and write more music.

Ice Cream for Crow., the Captain's twelfth record for his seventh label, marks a musical retreat to his early style. Preventing a set of slide guitar, extravaganzas and folk-like instruments along with his most humane lyrics to date. Beefheart's legendary seven-octave vocal range is little in evidence, due either to the toll of too many cigarettes or an effort to seem more contrived. In either case it is sorely missed; a few healthy screamings would have provided much-needed access to the rock-re-tour regular for Beefheart: the lyric. Arrangements. Most noticeable, if only because of their absence, are Eric Drury's driving keyboard playing - present only on "Earthquake."...and harmonica and his nasal vocals amid a forest of independent rhythms.

Two frenetic rockers distinguish themselves: one from the disc's overall even keel. The first, the title track, describes a bizarre Halloween ritual:

Tonight there's gonna be a leather treatment Beneath the symbol we'll all assemble Oh how we'll fly

The second, "The Fast Sure Is Terse," could pass for a bona fide punk number if it weren't for Beefheart's penchant for wit.

"End Song" features a lone saxophone and a number of the Guild's acclaimed instrumental ensemble. While less obtrusive later in the show, this weakness is, unfortunately, quite pervasive. The company's execution of"The Host the Ghost the Gnomes" leaves the audience anesthetized. The company's execution of several numbers, moreover, lacks cohesiveness and appears overrehearsed.

The highlight of an otherwise uninspired show is the team of caricatured gangsters, who play "Brash Up Your Shakespeare" in a most entertaining musical and dance number of the production.

Robson acts the part of Fred Graham/Petrucio well, but the weakness of his voice is demonstrated in several songs, including the title number. Mercer, conversely, is almost convincing as Lilli Vanessi/Katherine, but her excellent voice redeems her performance.

Kiss Me Kate is a mediocre musical, and the Guild's production is simply dull. Shakespeare did much better; read his book instead.

David Shaw

Kalamity Kate

Kiss Me Kate, presented by the MIT Musical Theatre Guild. Performances tonight and tomorrow at 8pm, Kresge Auditorium.

Had William Shakespeare seen this show, he would have stuck to sonnets. A few memorable musical numbers do not a fine musical make, nor do a few pleasing individual performances a strong production make.

Kiss Me Kate, another entry in the all-too-familiar genre of backstage musicals, projects The Taming of the Shrew onto the actors performing Shakespeare's comedy. Fred Graham (Michael Robson) directs The Taming of the Shrew and plays Petruchio opposite Lilli Vanessi (Alice Mercer) as Katherine. Divorced Graham and Vanessi's backstage battles parallel their characters' onstage strife.

The major problem with this production is Kresge Auditorium, or more precisely, the Musical Theatre Guild's continued inability to master the building's acoustics. The lyrics of "Another Opening," perhaps the show's strongest number, are obliterated by their orchestral accompaniment. While less obtrusive later in the show, this weakness is, unfortunately, quite pervasive.

Musical director David Gaylin is at least partly responsible for the show's slack pace, as evidenced in "Wunderbar" and other fast-act music.

Juanita Blanchette Kus's choreography is tedious and insipid: Longer dance numbers such as "Tarantella" leave the audience anesthetized. The company's execution of these numbers, moreover, lacks cohesiveness and appears overrehearsed.

The highlight of an otherwise uninspired show is the team of caricatured gangsters played by B. P. Gilligly and David Smith. Their performances as the portentious pair are splendid, and their rendition of "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" is the most entertaining musical and dance number of the production.

Robson acts the part of Fred Graham/Petrucio well, but the weakness of his voice is demonstrated in several songs, including the title number. Mercer, conversely, is almost convincing as Lilli Vanessi/Katherine, but her excellent voice redeems her performance.

Kiss Me Kate is a mediocre musical, and the Guild's production is simply dull. Shakespeare did much better; read his book instead.

Barry S. Serman