

CALENDAR

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LOS ANGELES TIMES



THE GANG'S ALL HERE: A dandified Silas Leech Esq., center, acts as narrator in "The Fortune Teller" at the Freud Playhouse.

THEATER REVIEW

Sin, with strings attached

Erik Sanko's 'Fortune Teller' uses puppets to take a macabre look at the consequences of man's foibles.

By CHARLOTTE STOUT
Special to The Times

With Halloween coming up, it's good to remember that we can be creeped out by something other than presidential candidates and the frenzy over Iggygate. And there's perhaps nothing so uncanny as a silent puppet: a face without animation, a body in the control of an unseen hand. They're emblems of our mortality, our secret childhood sense that we're playthings of an omniscient force. Doomed puppets populate "The Fortune Teller," Erik Sanko's macabre dollhouse of the dead, now on view at the Freud Playhouse as part of UCLA Live's International Theatre Festival.

Our narrator is Silas Leech Esq., deliciously voiced by vocalist Gavin Friday and embodied by a dandified crocodile marionette. With velvet vowels, Leech informs us that he's been called to serve as the executor for the estate of one Nathaniel Ax, and an entourage of sorts has shown up to see what the old man might have left them. But instead of a bequest, each of the seven hopefuhs receives a reading by a sepulchral fortuneteller who suggests that every man will be hoisted by his own petard, a victim of the deadly sin he embodies (the cook, gluttony, an actor, pride; a banker, greed; etc.). Like a set of 3-D "Gashlycrumb Tiny" tales, "Teller" shows how these hangars-on will meet their end.

Everything about "The Fortune Teller" is exquisitely rendered, including the eerie blank-



A GOTHIC WIT: The blacksmith is among characters in "The Fortune Teller," all of whom become victims of their own sins.

ness of the fortuneteller puppet's voice and the architectural details of the Ax mansion (courtesy of Jessica Grindstaff, Selin Maner and Matthew Acheson).

A Gothic wit drives the aesthetic: We're treated to a mock-

'The Fortune Teller'

Where: Freud Playhouse, UCLA, Westwood

When: See www.uclalive.org for schedule

Ends: Oct. 28

Price: \$32

Contact: (310) 825-2101

Running time: 1 hour

mor; and Friday's droll narration lingers over the play's ornate turns of phrase — the cook's kitchen style is "something between a wrestling match and a tango" — and he relishes the mordant puns that indicate the appropriate fate each vice-laden man will meet.

But the piece ultimately suffers from issues of scale. Even though a limited audience views the play from risers sitting directly on the Freud Playhouse stage, the sightlines of "Fortune Teller" can be frustrating, with the overall effect more constraining than pleasingly diminutive. That sense of missing out is also a function of the play's awkward storytelling.

The sinners' deaths feel static, more an inevitable end than a startling climax. It's as if Sanko has yet to find the key to turn his own story, and when he appears onstage as Old Scratch at the end of the play, you wish he'd played more with the contrast between puppets and humans earlier in the evening — anything to engage us more fully in his art. "The Fortune Teller" is more tableau than theater, and in the end, this beautifully constructed haunted house never really comes to life.