

HIGH STEEL

Perchance Theatre

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Reviewed by Michelle Butler Hallett

History can unfurl like a sail — a sail at once suggested and denied by the iron (painted wooden) girders on the set of *High Steel*.

It's too easy, and a bit of a cop-out, to call *High Steel* a musical. A blend of music and story is an old form, and also a very effective one, which is why humans have performed theatre this way for millennia. Songs knit *High Steel's* backbone, and while the songs often comment on the situations, or allow a safe emotional space to consider the situations, they never intrude or feel tacked on. Nor do they slow the action, a common complaint from non-musical lovers. *High Steel* rollicks and barrels along through multiple generations and multiple storylines with a vivacious ensemble cast — because it is collective theatre, scrappy theatre born of an economic and emotional deprivation that is defeated, or at least given a solid knee to the nads, by creativity and passion.

That passion also shows in how the script got written. The history nerd in me says hats off to the research done for this play: speaking with people who'd lived the experience. Transforming oral history into written drama and then into performed drama and song — oral, again — is almost magical.

And the set. Can we take a minute to admire the set which immediately and simultaneously suggested iron girders way up in the sky, Newfoundland outport houses, various dive bars, and oh, a funeral home? And can we also acknowledge how the same set is used brilliantly in *The Flying Doctor* — and, I presume, *The Tempest* — to completely different purpose? It's genius set-design. Ditto on the costumes.

The necessary economy of design here signals not only excellent stagecraft in the present but the improvised necessities of trying to mount a show here in the past, especially back in the 1980s, when *High Steel* first appeared. Theatre is a collaborative art, one more often based on a single-authored text. In Newfoundland's theatre history, collective theatre with multiple writers had

been the norm; the TV shows *Wonderful Grand Band* and *CODCO* are just two examples. Ensemble casts, economic sets, storytelling passion, with a budget about the same as a CEO's lunch bill ... oh, wait, it still is. I could borrow from Linda Hutcheon and call it historiographic meta-drama, but what's the point? Audience or performer, we already know how multiple levels of historical storytelling can work. We may not perceive the levels all at once, but that hardly stops us from enjoying the show.

Stepping around the histories for a moment, I also found *High Steel* to be a stealth meditation on masculinity. The question is implied throughout the play and uttered near the end: what does it mean to be a man? It's a concern shared by women, too, as historically men have liked to think of themselves as in charge, and we've had to navigate that. So, what dire responsibility comes with being in charge, with chasing dangerous work to feed wife and children and keep one's own body and bones together?

Body and bones don't last a fall from a great height.

Performances are energetic and often hilarious — in that melancholy hilarity that comes of recognising oneself in a mirror: one's angry self, one's cruel self, one's drunken self, and, if we're lucky, one's loving self. It's all there at once in the final scene with the sloppy mess of Costigans, the women exasperated and grieving, the men drunk and brawling over an open casket — drunk, because they have no idea how to cry. I'm tempted to describe these recognitions and their tragic-comedy, or comic tragedy, as uniquely Newfoundland.

They're not.

They're human.

And that is where *High Steel* truly succeeds. Newfoundland's economic struggles and the consequences: check. Deep respect for those who lived the experiences dramatised: check. Plenty of cultural in-jokes: check. Songs by Ron Hynes: check. Collective theatre creation and experience: check. Deeper questions on what it means, and what we need, to be human, which then elevate the show to the universal: oh, yeah, definitely check. What began as a piece of collective historical drama in the 1980s has itself become a piece of history, even as it's performed now, and the multi-level conversations happening as a result only strengthen *High Steel's* vitality, relevance, and humanity.

Or you can just go see it for a good laugh.

Either way, this production of *High Steel* delivers, by the punt-load.