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ARTS

THEATER

Airwaves for the imagination

"Shade's Brigade" brings back golden-age radio.

BY JACKIE RENZETTI
jrenzetti@mndaily.com

When Eric Webster noticed his bar stool creaking, he immediately asked the bar owner if he could purchase it.

The creaking noise mimicked the sound of an opening door in Webster's radio play, "Shade's Brigade." In this original series created in the style of 1930s-50s "golden-age" radio shows, four actors play multiple characters and make all the sound effects on stage for an audience. Webster split the show into six one-hour

episodes that he and his co-stars perform monthly in one run.

This weekend, they kick off their first episode at Bryant-Lake Bowl Theater.

"There's a lot of choices when listening to radio theater that are yours and yours alone. I love that participation of it," Webster said.

Webster wrote his piece in the same style of one of his favorite writers, Carlton Morse, who wrote the radio play "I Love a Mystery." Webster kept dialogue, character dynamics and the overall pace of the story in tune with that of Morris and typical golden age radio.

Next, Webster made a slight break from the traditional form and chose only



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The cast of Shade's Brigade brings their imaginative series to Bryant-Lake Bowl Theater starting Sunday.

Brigade

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four actors to both play characters and make sound effects. The decision met both the budget and entertainment standard of the 21st century.

"I want [listeners] to enjoy and create their own scenes in their head, but I also have to cater to today's audience and give them more to look at than just people reading a script," he said.

Webster said that because of the multitasking, the show has a chaotic feel to it that both the actors and audiences enjoy.

"What they did was based on the original, but they took it to another level with their energy and enthusiasm and excitement," said Steve Raymer, the managing director of the Pavek Museum of Broadcasting, who has seen the show previously.

Webster also chose his props wisely, knowing that outlandish objects such as upside-down bikes or barstools grab his audience's attention.

"I walk through Fleet Farm, and they look at me like I'm crazy 'cause I just grab things," Webster said. "Can I help you?" "I'm just trying to see what noise this makes." "It's a rain gutter."

Aaron Pruesse, a friend of Webster's who has seen the show, said part of the thrill is

appreciating the creativity.

"You're getting to glimpse behind the curtain and see how it comes together," he said. "It's like, 'Oh my gosh, that totally is someone running to catch the train!' — when it's really just an actor with a couple blocks and kitty litter."

Actors Dave Gangler and Shanan Custer, Webster's wife, both said they enjoy the common occurrence of mistakes that happen in the frenzied performance.

"The audience can see very clearly that we blew it. It's fun to be able to look at the audience and share in that failure with us," Gangler said. "Those moments, oftentimes, I find are more rich than anything else because they're so real and honest."

A lost and found art

Though radio plays don't receive mainstream attention, they still exist occasionally on radio stations and in theaters, and widely online.

Jerry Stearns, host of a radio drama show titled "Sound Affects" on KFAI, said the resurrection of radio plays happened with the creation of the Internet.

Television replaced the entertainment needs that radio drama once met. Once people could start creating and sharing their own radio plays, the art form became more prominent, though it largely doesn't exist on big-

"Shade's Brigade"

Where Bryant Lake Bowl, 810 W. Lake St., Minneapolis

When 7 p.m. Sunday

Cost \$10-\$12

name radio stations, he said.

Both Stearns and Webster spoke of a large online community of radio playwrights whose aesthetics range from contemporary to golden-age styles.

Webster chose to stay in the classic style because of his personal interest.

Webster studied speech communications at the University of Minnesota until 1991, when he left school nearing graduation to pursue radio opportunities. He worked in radio for several years before switching his focus to acting. The play represents a combination of his theatrical skills and passion for golden-age radio, which he has held since childhood.

As a child, he ordered cassettes from catalogues that offered old-time radio recordings.

"The form is attractive to me because it disappeared," Webster said. "I love that ... there's this thing frozen in time. ... It's how you write it; it's got its own language, its style of talking. It's got its own personality."