

[“Shade’s Brigade” is a rollicking homage to the joys of old-time radio](#)

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Here’s a delightful bit of theater that may have flown under your radar: [“Shade’s Brigade,”](#) a staged “radio thriller” in the style of classic ’30s and ’40s broadcast serials. The show is the creation of Twin Cities theater stalwart [Eric Webster](#) and is presented by the [Producing House](#). Each episode is performed live, on stage at [the Jerome Hill Theater](#) in Lowertown St. Paul; audiences have two shots to see each monthly installment. I came in on the series for its second hour-long episode, last weekend. (If you’re interested, you have another chance at it this Sunday, July 21.)

The theater is small and old-fashioned, with fold-down desks like you sometimes find in aging high school auditoriums. The stage is set simply: a pair of tables and a creaky swivel stool, microphones lined up in a row at the front. Props to make sound effects sit at the ready: a pair of hard-soled men’s shoes for the clip-clop of footsteps; a heavy metal box to slam shut; glassware to chink and paper to rustle; a frayed hand towel for ripping; and a Styrofoam coffee cup to squeak for the sound of a boat creaking in the waves.



Eric Webster as “Jack Shade.” Poster via the show’s website

Writer, director and star of the show Eric Webster offers a brief introduction for the small crowd of listeners the night I attend. He says he grew up enchanted by the warmth and immediacy of radio: listening first to Johnny Carson and North Star Hockey games on local broadcast stations, and then discovering the classics from the golden age of the medium in the 1930s and '40s, serials filled with cowboys and private eyes, wise guys and dames, superheroes and space adventures. He says he wrote “Shade’s Bridgade” specifically to pay homage to one of his favorites, a genre-bending adventure series called “I Love a Mystery.” (Many of the episodes have since been lost, but you can hear some of what’s still available [online here](#).)

“Radio drama is the only art form that asks the listener to participate fully with the artist,” Webster says. What you see as you hear the story belongs only to you, as the characters and exotic places conjured by the sounds coming through the speaker spring to life in your mind’s eye. And because your imagination helps create them, those stories are endowed with a singular vividness that’s impossible for visual media to duplicate.

“Shade’s Brigade” follows a formula familiar to fans of the form: four performers enact all the roles and create all the sound effects on stage, in real time. The titular team of world-traveling mercenaries is led by an ex-military man with a shadowy past, Captain Jack Shade (Eric Webster), who’s accompanied by a big-talking alligator wrestler from the Georgia swamp and a lovable strongman “a step to the left of smart” (both roles played by the very funny, [Mystery Café co-founder, Lee Adams](#)); their team also includes a highbrow Brit with a background in the British special service ([Dave Gangler](#)), and a leggy, tough talking transportation specialist, Major Kate Stafford, “who can fly or drive anything... including a man, crazy” (Brave New Workshop veteran [Shanan Custer](#)).



Lee Adams and Dave Gangler on stage, performing in “Shade’s Brigade.” Photo courtesy of the artists

The troupe is ensnared in a nefarious scheme by Jack Shade’s old nemesis, a slippery criminal mastermind and internationally renowned hypnotist and magician, Anton Worth. The story doesn’t fit any one genre style, instead borrowing freely from them all: it’s a time-travel tale and a supernatural thriller, a crime drama and globetrotting adventure yarn that takes the brigade from a shipwreck on a lonely island in the middle of nowhere, to a Paris of years gone by, to a yacht moored hidden off India’s coast.

The show is a delight from start to finish – smartly written and beautifully performed, often laugh-out-loud funny. It’s completely engaging – a fine show for several generations of family to see together, and an especially good bet for older elementary-schoolers and tweens.

Fewer than 30 people attended the show I saw, and that just won’t do. This performance is too delicious an experience not to draw bigger crowds. You can easily catch up on missed episodes: show producer Mike Todaro tells me there are plans to make audio for the first two installments of the serial available as podcasts beginning July 25. “Shade’s Brigade” will have a standard run for this sort of radio program, about 15 episodes in all – a new episode will be staged two times every month, each ending in a cliffhanger to keep you coming back for more from June 2013 through early spring 2014.

Tickets for the live show of “Shade’s Brigade” are a mere \$10 each – about the price of seeing a movie, but far more memorable. You can catch a second showing of [“Shade’s Brigade,”](#) episode two, on stage at the [Jerome Hill Theater](#), Sunday July 21 at 7 p.m., 105 East Fifth Street, St. Paul. Or, listen to podcasts of the first two installments of “Shade’s Brigade” online, beginning July 25. Audio versions of future episodes of the staged radio show will go live on the website two weeks prior to each new installment. Two live performances of episode three are in the works, set for August 18 and 25.

Find ticket information and details about the cast, and listen to podcasts of the show when they become available on the website: www.shadesbrigade.com.

<http://www.knightarts.org/community/stpaul/shades-brigade-is-a-rollicking-homage-to-the-joys-of-old-time-radio>