

Theater Review: 'The Gold Night' at Baltimore Rock Opera Society

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By Emily Hofstaedter

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From left: Kay Black, Renee Gibson, Angela Whittaker (as Klondike Kate), Nate Daley, Reema Sood, KS Garner, and Emma Podietz. Photo by Heather Keating.

I'm trying not to make any gold references here but I'm failing. This play is so delightfully rough-hewn and glittery, a true visual and aural masterpiece, carefully carved into existence by some of the most creative minds in Baltimore. This was my first Baltimore Rock Opera Society production and the company's reputation precedes them by a lot, so my expectations were high. "The Gold Night," created by Jessica Keyes and written by John Bennett, largely did not disappoint. The music, also by Keyes with Abby Becker, is phenomenal. The set, costume, and prop work are stunning. Perhaps one of the biggest rounds of applause came from a clever scene transition from Yukon mountain into a western saloon. They've even created moving trains and mining equipment.

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The plot and pacing of the writing aren't great and by the end of the first act and I still wasn't really sure where the play was going or what it was about. The first act spends just a little too much time on character introduction. That said, these actors deftly handle roles that could have been two-dimensional parodies and breathe real life into them. The writing relies on some tropes that are as well-worn as a good pair of cowboy boots but they work well here. There's a business-savvy, morally-gray saloon woman, a jaded doctor and hero, and the outlaws running from their past.

Basically, it's the twilight of the Klondike Gold Rush and a gang of misfits descend on Dawson City for one last chance to strike gold—literally. We're more or less following a stalwart explorer guide named Riley (Hanna Al-Kowski) who clearly has repressed traumas and secrets. She leads the hilariously foppish Dandy Calvin Prescott (Derek Vaughan Brown), heir to a digestive biscuit fortune, into Dawson where his father has sent him to find gold. As Prescott deals with exploitative Canadian mounties who shake him down for bribes and the shock of coming to "a place completely bereft from the comforts of man or the light of the day," they encounter a man who has just had some type of unfortunate mining accident. Prescott faints and with the help of Doc (Nate Daley), our characters are whisked away to the Phoenix Hotel for medical care.

Klondike Kate (Angela Whittaker) runs the Phoenix and we soon learn that Riley is her estranged daughter. Kate is a less-than-honest business woman but she's blunt about it, telling us that the Yukon is no place for niceties. "Some win but most lose. Either be rich or dead." We learn that Kate is waiting for a visit from a very famous, and hopefully very rich, inventor named WK Dickerson (Zach Pease). We meet him at the end of the first act and learn that he has been boring through the mountains, sans the required mining claim, in the hopes that he will find "Shambala," the entrance to a mythical hollow earth. He says if he finds Shambala, he can create a utopian society. There are clear nods to Elon Musk and other rich inventor-eccentrics who claim they can save the world at the expense of those less-fortunate and, therefore, expendable.

With all of his mining, Dickerson has awakened the Klondike Ice Worms, man-eating beasts who live deep within the mountains and have now made their way to the surface to enact their reign of carnage on Dawson City. Will our humans survive? You'll have to see the show to find out.

This show was definitely giving vibes along the lines of "Xanadu" and "Starlight Express." Go for the music, the glamor, and the camp and you won't be disappointed. The score is really fantastic with styles ranging from bluegrass, soul, and funk to rock.

The opening number, "Gold or Bust," is a nice little earworm (no pun intended) that I've been humming for two days. Likewise, "The Future is Future" is a memorable, full-cast Act One closer. Angela Whittaker as Klondike Kate is an exceptional leading lady with marvelous vocal skills. Carley Pursley, a French barman in love with a Sasquatch (Gabriel Duque), also

stands out. There is one unmistakable showstopper and that's Nate Daley as Doc singing "Ballad of the Scales," a haunting Appalachian-style ballad. It is the song that warns us of the power of nature and that the mountain cares nothing for human life. You could feel the audience collectively leaning forward and holding their breath for that one.

I'll say it one more time, the show has some of the best prop and set work I've seen in Baltimore and that includes some of the full-time theater companies. The Ice Worms are brilliant but perhaps maybe too adorable for something so deadly! It's the kind of acting and production work that really showcases Baltimore's place as a creative powerhouse.

While I admittedly panned some of the writing, this is a play that's very relevant, perhaps more so now than when BROS began the concept in 2016. Mining is a very insidious expression of human greed. It is the exploitation of the earth in a way that will alter the ecosystem for generations or millennia to come. In some way, we always convince ourselves that we do it for the greater good. As I listened to Dickerson wax on about trying to save the world, I couldn't help but think of all the minerals demanded by Green Infrastructure projects. To go electric, we still have to mine lithium, which, just like in the gold rush, will disproportionately impact communities of color. Is it worth it to get off fossil fuels and potentially save our planet for the future? It's a question we are all considering and one that "The Gold Night" prompts too.

I don't know those answers. But I do know that in the end, we are all just food for worms.

Running Time: Approximately two hours and 30 minutes with one 30-minute intermission.

Advisory: Recommended for mature teens and up. The building has wheelchair access and there will be an outdoor accessible toilet at all shows. There is closed captioning provided for the songs. The theatre is in an old bank building which may be confusing for those using GPS directions.

"The Gold Night" runs through October 21, 2023 at 1 East Baltimore Street (at the southwest corner of Baltimore and Charles), Baltimore MD, 21202. For more information and tickets, go [online](#). Masks are not required.