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Poe-Dunk – A Matchbox Entertainment

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reviewed by **Ed Malin** · February 24, 2012

Poe-Dunk by Kevin Hale is a delightful trip through all the Edgar Allen Poe stories you might not have read yet. You will really see how many-sided Mr. Poe was; did you know he anticipated true-crime stories and spaghetti westerns? Best of all, this show is performed with matchsticks and other deceptively simple props. But don't worry about squinting to see all of this—a camera focused on Hale's fingers (deftly operated throughout by Andrew Berardi) and projected on a screen puts "Poe under a microscope." This show was also seen in FringeNYC 2011.

In my program I see a list of 32 largely "new-to-me" works by Poe. In the 60 minute show, these works are presented as proof that Poe considered himself a humorist. Yet, scholars throw around the word "satire" because they just don't think he's funny. Come see for yourself. These stories are as dark as the more famous pieces, and even present the extremely rare (for the period) female protagonist.

For example, in "The Scythe of Time" Signora Psyche Zenobia climbs the steps to the top of a huge clock tower and pokes her head out of the window. At twenty-five minutes past five, the minute hand on the clock cuts her head off, but she is still able to function without it. If that was his attitude, I can see why Poe did not focus more on female characters.

In "Berenice," the young and somewhat bipolar Egaeus is about to marry his equally beautiful and sickly cousin Berenice. As her body wastes away, Egaeus obsesses about her still-perfect teeth. When Berenice dies, Egaeus loses focus then regains consciousness later with dirt stains on his shirt and a box of 32 pearly-white items in front of him. A servant brings news that Berenice's grave has been disturbed.

Well, the point may be that Poe was only amusing to himself. The remainder of the show vindicates him by showing his other literary contributions. His only play, "Politian," based on a Kentucky murder trial, is presented as a precursor to crime shows. His "man with no name" trilogy portrays a lone vigilante who shows up to right wrongs. Several of his stories inspired the writing of Melville's *Moby Dick*, while others inspired Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. I won't even get into Poe's space travel stories, which so interested Jules Verne.

Kevin Hale's crafting of numerous small backdrops for these stories—usually matchboxes—is most impressive. Under John Pieza's direction, his wry delivery does much to improve Poe's non-fiction, including a piece about the rats who infest a prominent New York theater and can end the show when they please. Also, in Poe's piece about interior decorating, the suggestion to use wicker chairs from Copenhagen prompts the quip "something is rattan in the state of Denmark." I think there's something for everyone in this show, and you may even get to do some audience participation.

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