



## Murder Ballad Murder Mystery: A frightening night of bizarre theater

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On any given weekend, there are nearly a half dozen original plays making their way to Austin stages, and because of this, most theater goers have seen a wide variety of strange and unusual things on stage, but nothing can prepare visitors for what they will experience with the latest offering from director Dustin Wills, along with the folks over Vortex and Tutto Theater. One part musical, one part horror, and one part mystery, with a dash of comedy added to the mix, Murder Ballad Murder Mystery takes us through the darkest parts of the American foothills and backwoods, into lands populated by nothing but killers, and the killed. From beginning to end, the play not only keeps folks guessing, but leaves the audience completely clueless as to what could possibly happen next, presenting surprise after surprise. It's a bizarre ride, but it makes for one of the most refreshing experiences you'll find on Austin stages.

Our story is told with the help of a chorus of ghosts, each them of them causing a ruckus while they pluck and bow their instruments, occasionally winding themselves into the fabric of the story. The cast of characters is massive, including a tough-as-nails sheriff, two outlaws on the run from the law, and some very whacked out hillbillies, and they bring with them several different stories, which weave into one another, so that following all the different storylines can become difficult if one doesn't pay attention. Saying too much about the story would be ruining the experience for future visitors, so let's just say that the play follows a group murderers and their victims, as they kill, are killed, and sing lovely songs all the while. There's also a detective and a psychic thrown in for good measure, but anymore about that will ruin one of the biggest surprises of the show.

The spot where many Vortex musicals begin to fall apart is the music, but luckily it all came together beautifully for this production. Composers Mark Stewart and Andy Tindall did a fine job of making sure each song is a little piece of Southern love, and though a microphone or two wouldn't have hurt, each of the actors gave it their all to bring the songs to life. These songs don't distract from the story, but instead propelled the action forwards, which is one of the main keys to any successful musical. The actors, for the most part, sung their parts well, with the raw power of their southern sound ringing through in almost every note. The singing wasn't perfectly on pitch at all times, but instead of hurting the production, it instead reminded listeners of the soulful influence of the classic folk ballad on the piece.



The play is not for everyone, and many folks will feel uncomfortable with the amount of violence, language, sexual content and other crass behavior within the show, as well the strange nature of the storyline and post-modernist bent of it all, but those who come with open minds and their thinking hats on will surely come away from it amazed. There's no more original show in Austin theaters right now, and there may not be one this unique all year.



Murder Ballad Murder Mystery is only playing through November 7, so be sure to purchase tickets soon so you can get in to see the show. For tickets, and to find out info about upcoming shows, be sure to visit [vortexrep.org](http://vortexrep.org).

All photos courtesy of Kimberly Mead

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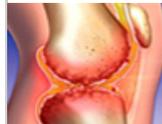
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