

# Review: 'Complete History' guarantees you'll laugh

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There’s so much comic material in “The Complete History of Comedy (abridged)” that, by all rights, it ought to take days to get through it all.

Fortunately, the three funnymen who opened the show at the Playhouse in the Park Thursday manage to crank through it all in just under two hours. But “The Complete History” is a wild, wild ride, a little like watching a trio of amateurs trying to ace Olympian Usain Bolt at the finish line. Bolt, incidentally, is one of the few personalities of popular culture *not* mentioned in the show.

“The Complete History” is the brainchild of Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor who, along with Dominic Conti, perform as The Reduced Shakespeare Company. They are exhaustingly hilarious. And the scope of their humor knows no bounds.

They are equal opportunity mockers, going after the British, liberals, political conflict in the Middle East – done with helium-laced voices – theater critics, Helen Keller, the Supreme Court – even the crucifixion. These guys don’t care about race or ethnicity. If you breathe, you’re a target for their humor.

Come to think of it, breathing isn’t really a requirement. There’s a resurrected Abe Lincoln as the original stand-up comic and a sketch that includes everyone from Cosmo Kramer to Lucille Ball, with a brief stop on the Starship Enterprise.

“Admittedly,” they point out, “these are not for everybody.”

They say it in jest, but it’s true. Some of their humor is juvenile. Some is tasteless. Some is base. Some, in their own words, is “sick.”

But it’s funny. Really, really funny.

There’s a bit of music, too; a very sweet song – with ukulele accompaniment – called “If I didn’t know how to laugh, I would cry.” And a raucous three-person, six-puppet medley sung by the members of the U.S. Supreme Court. And naturally, the justices perform numbers by The Supremes. How could they *not*?

There is a pie, too. Three pies, in fact. But it’s not enough for these guys to hurl the pies. They also offer a bit of philosophy about the significance of pies in the history of comedy.

The comedy flies by at hyper-speed. Let your attention wander for a moment and you’ll miss a joke. Three, probably. But there *will* be more.

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"The Complete History" is a perfect example of what the late Walter Kerr called "Hey, wait a minute theater." Comic material comes at you so quickly, so rapidly, so frantically that when a few lines fall flat – and they do, from time to time – the show has already moved on before you realize something hasn't worked.

"The Complete History" is not a finely polished, erudite production. The presentation is too rough and raw for that. The costumes look like they were dragged in from a thrift store. The sets are nearly non-existent. The props range from cheesy to ... well, they're mostly cheesy. But this is not a show about costumes or sets or props. It's a show about wit. About quick minds. About what makes us laugh. And what's fair game for laughter.

Don't come late, incidentally. If you do, you'll get a firsthand lesson on being comic fodder. When two women wandered in a few minutes after the show started on opening night, Austin stopped the show, teasing, tweaking and going just far enough to be funny without making the women regret showing up.

But then, that is precisely the sort of balance that makes this show work. It's clever and it's witty. And, most of all, it's really, really smart.

I don't want to get too philosophical here. Just know that you'll laugh. Not at everything, mind you. Some of the material may make you uncomfortable. It's supposed to. Mostly, though, you *will* laugh. Really hard. And smile so hard that – yes, it's a cliché, but it's true – your cheeks will hurt. When was the last time you went to the theater and had that sensation?

*"The Complete History of Comedy (abridged)" runs at the Playhouse's Thompson Shelterhouse Theatre through Dec. 29.*

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