

# Star Tribune

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## Hurlin's 'Cool Million' miniatures turn capitalism on its big head

### A review

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

With grinning bumpkin charm, Dan Hurlin inverts the all-American capitalist myth in his one-man theatrical version of Nathanael West's novel "A Cool Million." Playing 50-plus characters — and that doesn't include mob scenes — he turns Horatio Alger on his head with a sweet "aw, shucks" cynicism that disarmingly turns smiles to shudders.

Hurlin, the first performer in the Walker Art Center-Southern Theatre's annual "Out There" series, is a miniaturist. He works with wee props and symbolic objects, often investing things with the properties of characters. His hero, Lemuel Pitkin from Rat River, Vt., becomes a bow tie. When the bow tie moves to Hurlin's upper lip, it becomes Shagpolk Whipple, chairman of a busted bank, former president of the United States, leader of the National Revolutionary Party's storm troopers and incipient dictator. Whipple is at his best wrapped in a tiny flag, spouting jingoistic American optimism. When the bow tie moves to his forehead he becomes Lem's true love, Betty, who lives to be sexually exploited by the system and saved by Lem.

In dealing with miniatures, Hurlin runs the risk of being precious and at times, especially in the first act, he does become a bit too dear. But as the performance builds and accumulates ironic images it increasingly, captures the savage spirit of West's 1933 novel equating American capitalist ideals with creeping fascism, written as Hitler came to power in Germany.

Lem, a naive cross between Candide and Peer Gynt, is a poor boy charged up by Whipple's spirit: "Go out and seek your fortune. This is America. You can do anything!"

In his pursuit of an all-American fortune Lem loses his teeth, an eye, an arm, a leg, his scalp and finally his life. Too late, he learns that in the American scheme of things there are the top dogs and those they exploit to reach the top.

Hurlin deftly and amusingly parades stereotypes across the stage to show how those in power define and control those out of power. A feather becomes an Indian chief. A Chinese white-slaver is confused with Japanese, Malaysians and Koreans. Hats pushed across the stage become a mob.

Whipple triumphs by exploiting them all, including poor Lem, whom he finally turns into a freak comic in show biz. He regains political power by whipping up hatred for Bolshevik unions on one side, for the Jewish international banking conspiracy on the other.

The play builds in bite and anger without losing its wit or perspective. Hurlin punctuates it with well-chosen movements, ranging from a virtuoso klutziness for Lem to knock-down drag-out battles which, being a one-man show, he's forced to engage in with himself.

By the end, Lem is thoroughly devastated but still eager, thankful to be the butt of a second-rate comic in a third-rate theater.

We realize that though he is a victim, his sheeplike acceptance of trouble is the reason the Whipples of the world triumph. Lem takes it. Hurlin resolutely and cunningly does not.

### A Cool Million

**Who:** Created and performed by Dan Hurlin, presented as part of the Walker Art Center-Southern Theatre "Out There" series.

**Where:** Southern Theatre, 1420 Washington Av. S., Minneapolis.

**When:** 8 p.m. today.

**Tickets:** \$9. Call 340-1725.

**Review:** Hurlin plays all 50-plus characters in this adaptation of Nathanael West's savage 1933 novel equating capitalist optimism with creeping fascism. It's virtuoso stuff, increasingly biting yet witty and infused with an "aw, shucks" charm that makes the ultimate shudders all the more powerful.