

## Review: The Flying Karamazov Brothers at San Jose Rep

By Colin Seymour

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In a latter-day vaudeville act that originated in Santa Cruz and has lasted 37 years, the Flying Karamazov Brothers juggle everything from bowling pins and torches to personnel.

Ivan, Alyosha and Fyodor are gone, but Dmitri Karamazov (co-founder Paul Magid) is presiding over a new foursome at San Jose Repertory Theatre, where the Karamazovs' "4Play" opened a five-day, seven-performance run Wednesday. There's a Kuzma, a Zossima and even a Nikita Karamazov in the current edition, but still no Zeppo or Gummo.



Paul Magid as Dmitri in The Flying Karamazov Brothers

Much of the nearly full house on opening night seemed to be aficionados who, like "Rocky Horror" devotees, can be a raucous audience. The Karamazovs aren't drop-dead hilarious, but their song and patter are consistently amusing. It's all a pleasant diversion from theater fare, if not necessarily a desirable substitute.

Dmitri is still most deft, overmatched only when he tried to juggle a stuffed horse head, a stalk of Brussels sprouts and a salad oil-soaked sponge that audience members contributed to Wednesday's mix.

The horse head kept knocking sprouts all over the place and the stage became too slick for most of the Karamazovs' routines until a protracted cleanup during intermission. "It's got more oil than the Gulf," a brother proclaimed.

The humor is sort of topical, but there also is a smattering of Russian themes that may have been more biting during the Cold War than they are now. Jokes like "They think you're stallin' "... but I would have said you look more like Trotsky."

The juggling itself may not be impeccable -- Magid asks the audience not to unleash "mental tomatoes" but there is artistry from time to time.

A metronome establishes a backbeat for a routine in which the four performers bounce balls against floor and table amid the juggling to create increasingly complicated rhythms. A torch song combines fire, juggling and medieval four-part harmony.

In the opening scene, corrugated boxes cover the stage, as well as the backdrop, until a combination of juggling and Taiko smashes the extraneous ones and clears the floor -- well, at least until the subsequent barrage of oils and Brussels sprouts.

Magid still looks like he could be a 19th-century Russian: Rasputin. The others, not so much.

As Kuzma, Harry Levin wears horn-rimmed glasses, has a shock of white hair worn in a mid-20th-century style, and delivers punch lines with a sort of Mort Sahl-Shelly Berman sophistication that gives him a senior niche.

Nikita (Andy Sapora) is 40ish and endures a bit of rookie hazing when he has to dodge flying pins to retrieve the errant ones. Thus, Nikita assumes a role akin to his Three Stooges counterpart, Larry Fine. In his best bit, Sapora portrays a rural West Virginia woman in an homage to folk music.

Tall, thin Zossima (Stephen Bent) is even fresher new blood. He's a 20-something whose music and dance talent perpetuate some of the Karamazovs' notable strengths over the years. He looks sort of Russian, too. Bent seems to be Magid's protege.

If you know which protege is which in the literary classic that inspired this juggling-vaudeville act, it can't hurt. The group traditionally has paid ample tribute to the source material.

But you need not be daunted by Dostoyevsky. If you can appreciate a pie to the kisser, you're good to go.

'4Play'

Flying Karamazov  
Brothers

When: Through Sunday

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Tickets: \$36-\$69; [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com) or 408-367-7255