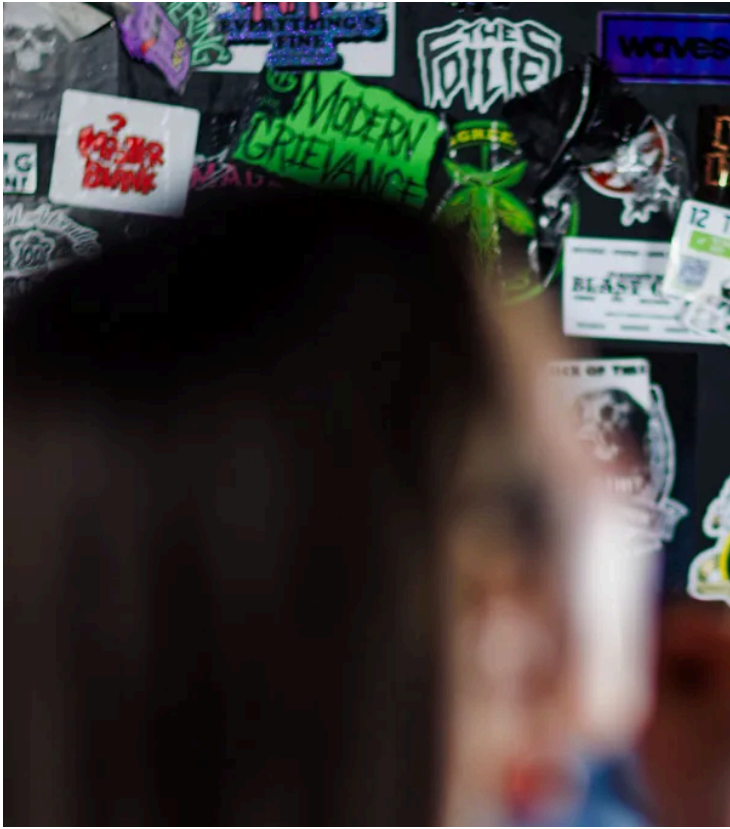


Dacha Theatre's 'Emma' turns Jane Austen classic into a campy comedy

April 8, 2025 at 1:00 pm | Updated April 8, 2025 at 1:00 pm



1 of 2 | Rachel Guyer-Mafune is a glittery Emma Woodhouse in Dacha Theater's adaptation of "Emma." (Brett Love)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Theater review

With 2025 marking the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, audiences can expect to see a lot of new adaptations of her novels this year. Adaptations of the classics are often self-conscious period pieces filled with historical costumes and stuffy accents, but not much life or laughter. Dacha Theatre doesn't have that problem.

Dacha presents "Emma" at 12th Avenue Arts on Capitol Hill through April 19. Playwright Kate Hamill's comedic, feminist take on the classic bildungsroman is directed by Sophia Franzella and offers an immersive seating option in which audience members become part of the show in the party-ready venue.

In Austen's book, Emma Woodhouse is a member of the idle landed gentry who fills her days with (often inappropriate) matchmaking. Her friend Mr. Knightley (an older man whose interest in Emma is itself inappropriate today) disapproves of her antics and tries to guide her to more suitable pursuits. On film, Emma has been portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow and, most recently, by Anya Taylor-Joy in direct adaptations, as well as by Alicia Silverstone in the cult classic "Clueless." There have also been Bollywood and BBC productions, along with countless stage adaptations.



Dacha Theatre presents “Emma” like you’ve never seen her before. (Brett Love)

Dacha’s production is unlike any of them. Its playful approach presents “Emma” with race- and gender-blind casting and no fourth wall at all. Not only is the audience addressed directly, but characters frequently refer to the novel and comment on viewers’ potential reactions. While general seating lines the walls like bleachers at a high school dance, immersive-seating patrons may be joined by performers at their tables on the dance floor and asked to hold a ball of yarn or box of tissues. But introverts need not fear: No one is invited to dance.

Forget historically accurate costumes, accents or manners. Expect bonnets paired with Converse shoes; dialogue that mixes Austen with lines like, “You envious, spitting kitten”; and characters crawling on the floor, talking with their mouths full, and showing a shocking amount of ankle and tongues.

By completely stripping “Emma” of historical pomp, Hamill and Dacha — both known for messing with the classics — create space for broad comedy and feminist commentary. Dacha’s visuals are campy, but Hamill sticks to the novel’s plot. She makes small narrative changes in service to feminism, such as Emma’s outburst expressing frustration at having no meaningful outlet for her potential, or Mrs. Weston (Kayla Walker) scolding Knightley for his superior attitude toward Emma. These speeches punctuate the comedy without puncturing it and quickly move on.



1 of 2 | Neither Frank Churchill nor Mr. Elton (both James Schilling) lives up to Knightley's (MJ Jurgensen) standards for marriage to Emma. (Brett Love)

Knightley was stuffy even by Regency-era standards, but MJ Jurgensen performs him with Neville Longbottom energy. This younger, awkward-yet-determined Knightley becomes a palatable, and even sweet, romantic match for Emma in the eyes of audiences who expect couples to belong to the same generation.

Unconstricted by genteel Regency manners, Rachel Guyer-Mafune's Emma is a frenetic wrecking ball injecting chaos into her uptight little community. Emily Huntingford's Harriet is perhaps the most three-dimensional character in this broad-strokes comedy, growing from Emma's awe-struck, treat-motivated prodigy to a woman who makes her own decisions.



Best friends Emma (Rachel Guyer-Mafune) and Harriet (Emily Huntingford) share tea and cookies in Dachä Theatre's production of "Emma." (Brett Love)

The rest of the cast play double roles, with multiple performers taking turns as the elderly Mrs. Bates, the bawdy Mrs. Elton or a bunch of strawberry plants. James Schilling runs with the opportunity to present two very different versions of slimy, unsuitable suitors in the roles of Frank Churchill and Mr. Elton. Riley Gene has no dialogue as Harriet's beau Robert Martin, but makes up for it as the loud, ridiculous Miss Bates, who is obsessed with Emma's rival, the too-perfect Jane Fairfax (Pearl Mei Lam). Van Lang Pham is both Mr. Weston and a gruel-obsessed Mr. Woodhouse.

Austen's novels could be considered feminist for her time, but she never let social messages interfere with a good story. Like Austen herself, Dachä's production of "Emma" places value on both wisdom and wit. It'll tweak the source material to make a point but do anything to get a laugh.

"Emma"

Through April 19; 12th Avenue Arts, 1620 12th Ave., Seattle; \$25-\$75 (pay what you can); accessibility info at events.humanitix.com; for additional accessibility requests or questions, email dachatheatre@gmail.com; 206-389-7676, dachatheatre.com