

Talk

City Theatre's Newsletter for Subscribers, Members, Patrons, and Friends

February — March 2005

THE *Dating Game*

If you think you've got some funny stories of dates gone horribly awry, then you haven't met **HALEY WALKER** — the hapless heroine of Theresa Rebeck's comic one-woman play *Bad Dates*. Rebeck, a Pulitzer-nominated

playwright who has also written and produced for such television shows as *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *NYPD Blue*, and *L.A. Law*, decided to mix

two things she was quite familiar with: dating and crime-drama. The result is the hilarious story of a single mother and shoe aficionado bent on succeeding in New York's

highly competitive restaurant business while finding

Mr. Right. There are only two tiny snags in that

plan: all the men out there are gay, married, or crazy, and her restaurant... well, it's owned

by Romanian mobsters. To learn more

about the mind behind the madness,

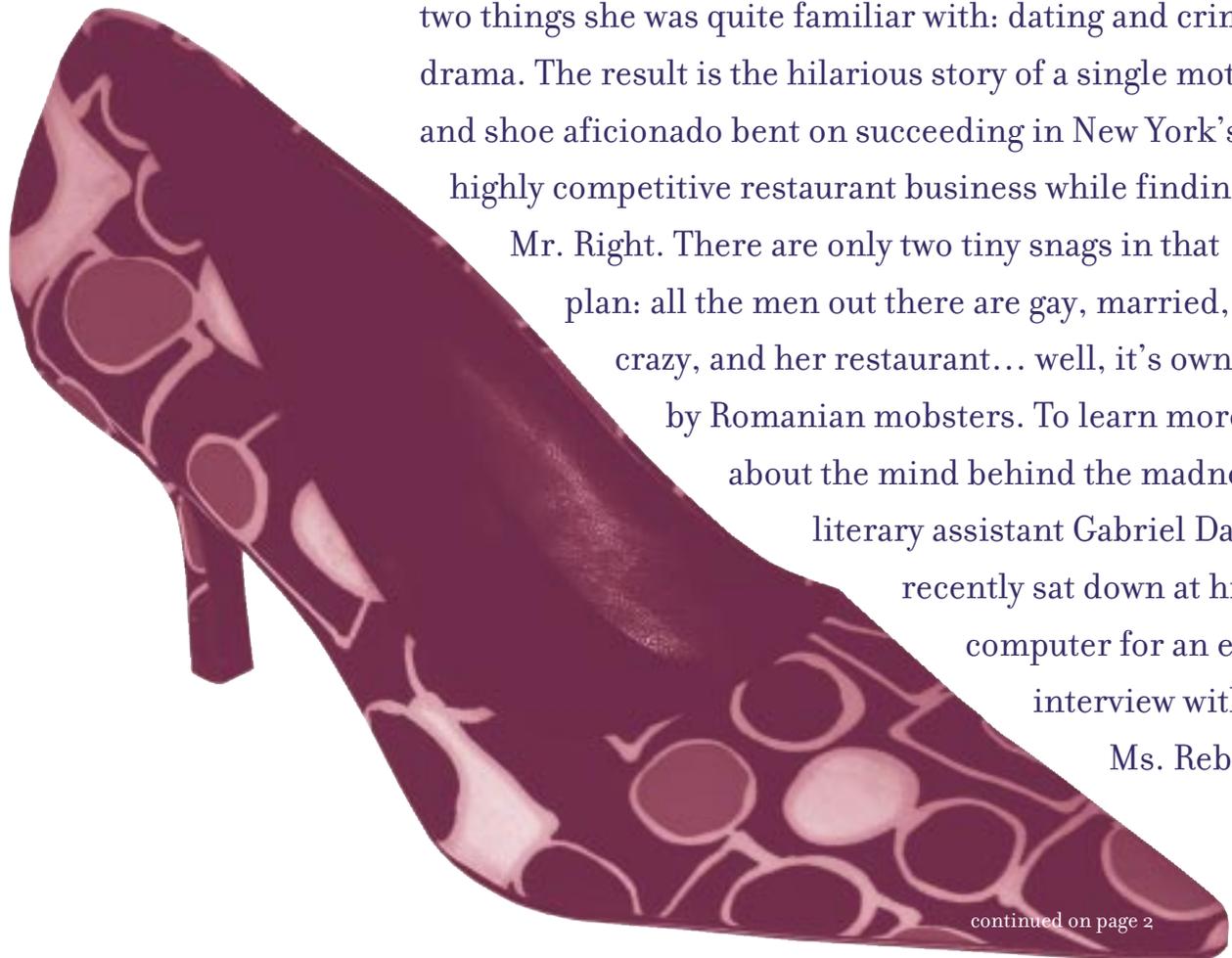
literary assistant Gabriel Davis

recently sat down at his

computer for an e-

interview with

Ms. Rebeck.



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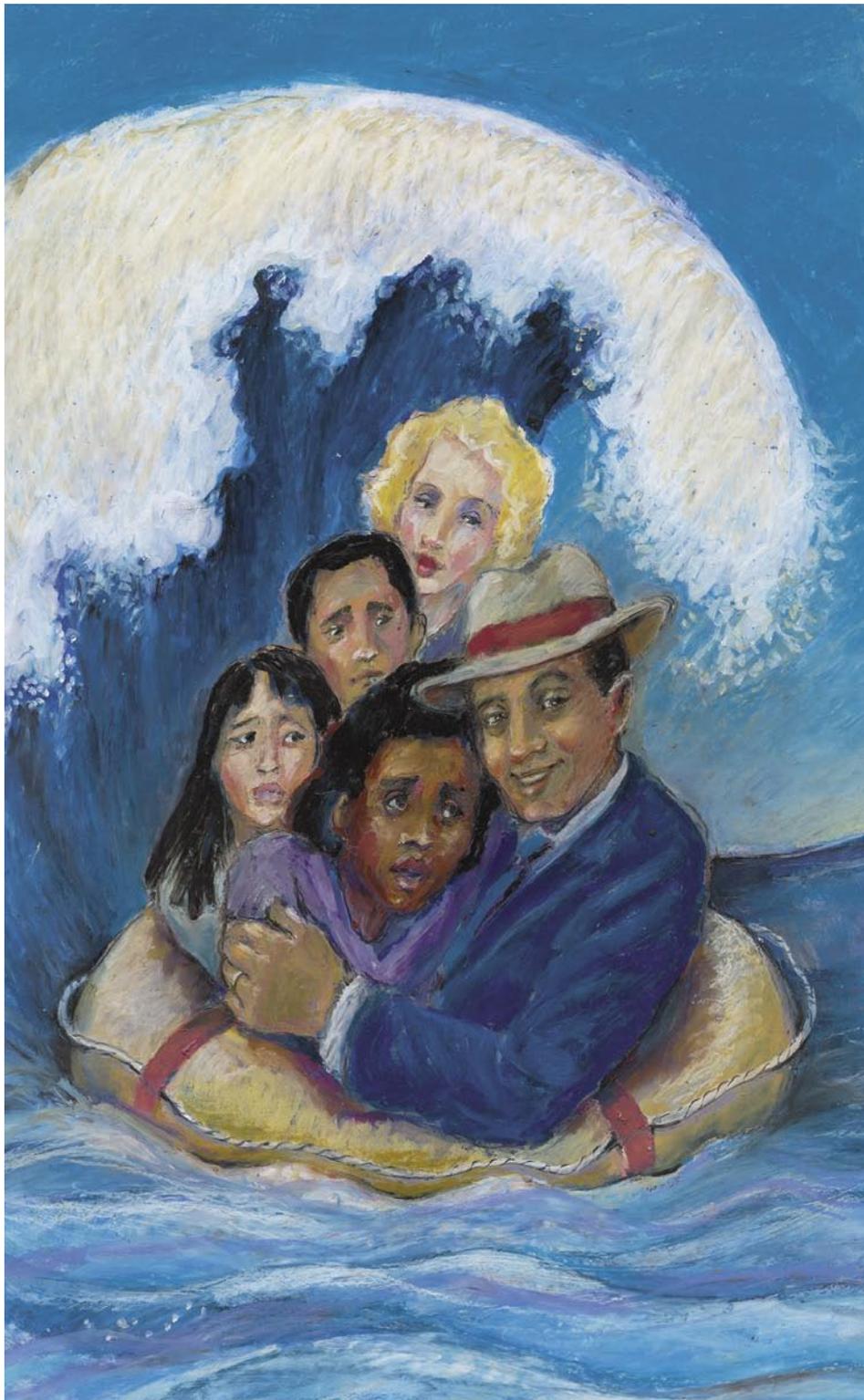


ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH WOLF

“There are no Golden Ages and no Dark Ages, but only the ocean-like monotony of the generations, of men under the alterations of fair and foul weather.”

– Thornton Wilder on *The Skin of Our Teeth*

THE PLAY: *The Skin of Our Teeth*

Wilder once said, “I can take care of my immortal soul, but who’s going to take care of my laundry?” The brilliant perspective that makes Wilder worthy of our attention is his ability to connect what is mundane and everyday in our lives with what is eternal, timeless, and universal. A fully connected life, Wilder tells us, requires equal concentration on both. And he gives both sides of life equal focus in *The Skin of Our Teeth* by dramatizing the entirety of human history, with the most “average” or ordinary stand-ins for all of humankind: a modern, suburban family from New Jersey.

Endowing a typical middle-class family with such epic significance lends the play its satiric flavor. Wilder has aptly given this family the last name Antrobus – taken from the Greek word anthropos, meaning human or person. And all of them exist on multiple levels as relatable contemporary figures, biblical and mythic figures, and finally as archetypes – classic, even generic personality types familiar to all of us (for example, motherhood, adultery, etc.).

For instance, the family’s patriarch George is described in Wilder’s words as a “John Doe or a George Spelvin or you – the average American.” In the theatre, the name George Spelvin is the John Doe equivalent: a generic pseudonym traditionally used by actors. George Antrobus is depicted as an everyman, but he is also connected to Noah before the

~ continued inside ~

INSIDER'S INSIGHT

Conceived and edited by Debra Baron, Director of Education

Written by Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

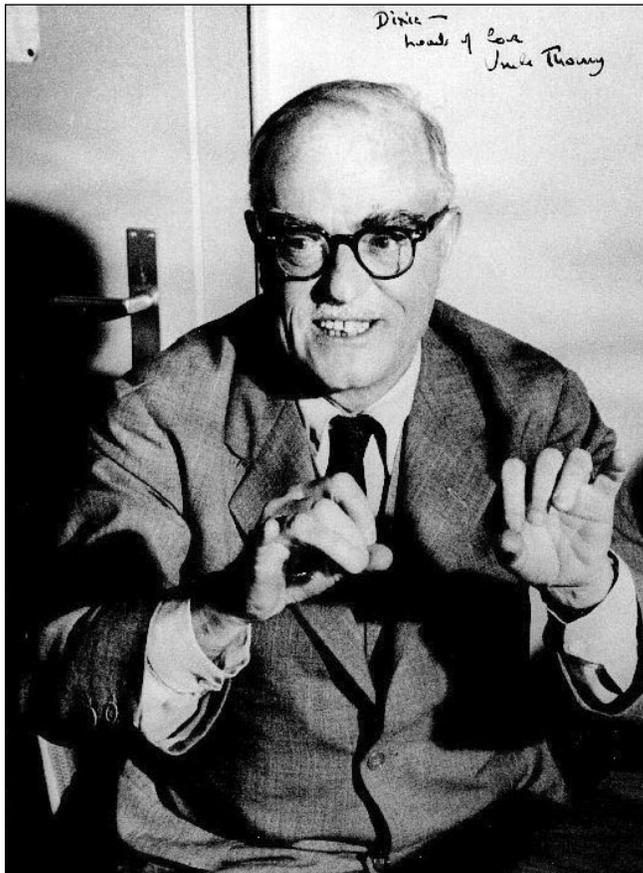
Available for download at westportplayhouse.org/allaboutus.htm

THE PLAY: *The Skin of Our Teeth*
continued from cover...

flood. He is father to a typical, middle-class American family and he is also Adam, father to the human race.

George's wife Maggie is Eve but she is also a contemporary mother. At one point, she takes on epic stature as Noah's wife before the flood, but remains relatable as she worries about whether her children are wearing their raincoats or not. Maggie also exists as a more general archetype of motherhood: she represents the power and ferocity of a mother's love. As her maid puts it, "If you want to know about Mrs. Antrobus... just go and look at a tigress, and look hard."

Wilder has made each member of the Antrobus family simultaneously identifiable in modern, mythical and biblical time periods to underline his play's message: no matter how much the world may shift and transform around us as time marches on, in successive generations we are essentially the same. In this way, Wilder's characters are able to do things as commonplace and everyday as their laundry and in those familiar gestures are able to tend to our "immortal souls," connecting us through suburban folk from New Jersey to what is enduring and perhaps even eternal in our humanity.



Thornton Wilder

THE AUTHOR: Thornton Wilder and his influences

*"Literature has always
more resembled a torch
race than a furious dispute among heirs."*

– Thornton Wilder

The greatest of dramatists are brilliant borrowers and Wilder built a theatrical career on arranging and excavating elements, from a life lived in literature, into fresh works for the stage. Going as far back as Shakespeare's canon of work, great playwrights are notorious for borrowing plots, reconstructing old stories and myths and making them their own. Wilder understood this. His view was that every artist should recognize the "enormous tradition of indebtedness from author to author."

One author to whom Wilder is indebted is James Joyce, whose novel *Finnegan's Wake* influenced *The Skin of Our Teeth*. For instance, Wilder ends *The Skin of Our Teeth* where it begins: with Sabina standing at the window, worried for her survival because Mr. Antrobus is not yet home. Joyce's novel follows a cyclical structure as well. The opening line of Joyce's masterwork is the second half of a sentence and the book ends with the first half of that same sentence; to complete it is to begin again. And like Mr. Antrobus of Wilder's play, Joyce's protagonist Finnegan is both an everyman and the father of man. Both protagonists are strong men, innovators but flawed. Both struggle to survive, fall into venial sin and error that leads to their destruction (or near-destruction in Wilder's) and are revived by the love of a strong woman.

Wilder takes some of the same philosophical material that Joyce grapples with and frames it in an entirely new way: as a comic burlesque. The idea came to Wilder when a chicken was put in his lap during Olsen and Johnson's screwball comedy, *Hellzapoppin'*. And what a choice! The comedy is what gives the play its sense of upbeat optimism even as it grapples with the darkest of themes: that we may go extinct at any moment - in every generation we're just barely hanging on by the skin of our teeth! It was this unique approach to the material that won Wilder the Pulitzer for this play and, as some modern theatre scholars contend - Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Paula Vogel, among them - it could have even won him the Nobel Prize were it not for the barrage of criticism he received when the play first premiered.

At its opening, critics charged that *The Skin of Our Teeth* was little more than an Americanized version of Joyce's work; that the play was in some way plagiarized. In a letter to "The Saturday Review of Literature" (which he never sent), Wilder defended himself, saying that his play "moved into its own independent existence through its insistence on being theatre..." However, in the end, Wilder chose not to dignify the accusation with a reply, perhaps because his own conception of the artist's role did not follow such a narrow, ego-driven view of ownership. As Harold Clurman put it, Wilder "arranges flowers beautifully, but does not grow them."

Wilder understood that his gift as dramatist lay in deft arrangement. Ever humble, he hoped only that his efforts would point the way for future generations: "The theatre has lagged behind the other arts in finding the 'new ways' to express how men and women think and feel in our time. I am not one of the new dramatists we are looking for. I wish I were. I hope I have played a part in preparing the way for them. I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of unobtrusive bric-a-brac. And as I view the work of my contemporaries I seem to feel that I am exceptional in one thing - I give (don't I) the impression of having enormously enjoyed it."



Inside front page of production program

Theater Review

Rasa among the Remains

Indian Ink's unusual setting contributes to a heightened sense of delight

INDIAN INK

By Tom Stoppard
Quantum Theatre
Allegheny Cemetery, Lawrenceville
Through August 25
412.394.3353

By Gabriel Davis

Using the love affair between a British poet and an Indian painter as its canvas, Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink* explores the dynamics of re-establishing Indian identity in the wake of British imperialism. Like Stoppard's Pulitzer winner *Arcadia*, this play connects past to present, with scenes set in the 1930s and the 1980s running in parallel.

Driving the central action, which is set in the 1930s, is Flora Crewe, a terminally consumptive British poet who has traveled to India in hopes that the climate will help to extend her life. A vivid character, Crewe cares not a wit for the mores of society, yet easily plays in its upper echelon, flirting with princes in India and counting H.G. Wells among her friends back home. She is described by her sister as typically treating men like batteries: When one goes flat she simply "sticks another one in."

Then she meets Nirad Das, an Indian painter with potential to be more than a Duracell to her. A lover of all things British, including her, Das's weakness as a painter — and as a love interest — may be that he has too much esteem for the culture of Stepmother England and not enough for his own.

Meanwhile, half a century later, Crewe's sister, Eleanor, has two guests for tea and cake: One is Das's son Anish, who, like his father, struggles with an identity that has both British and Indian influences. The other is Eldon Pike, a would-be Flora Crewe biographer, who tries to piece together her life — but who, we know, inevitably will get it all wrong.

In using the Allegheny Cemetery as a performance space, Quantum artistic director and founder Karla Boos has chosen a risqué but also highly evocative playing area. One might feel a bit uneasy initially as actors dance over and around genuine graves, including that of Earnest Guest, a four-year-old boy who passed in 1903. On the other hand, there may be a sense of satisfaction in seeing actors — a group historically denied burial in cemeteries alongside family — now welcomed into one to do a show.

In any case, the cemetery connects instantly to the atmosphere Stoppard conveys in his text. Set on a hill, actors emerge from behind tombstones in the distance, dancing down toward the audience, ghosts of the past emerging to live their story. Fire torches light the hillside, casting shadows and blending seamlessly with Todd Brown's understated lighting design.



Robin Walsh's Flora and Sanjit De Silva's Nirad create erotic intrigue in *Indian Ink*.

The feel of untamed, natural surroundings in a small Indian village where Crewe stays is made so much more palpable for the audience as real cicadas hop down from the trees above. At one point, they jump from one startled audience member to the next. For a moment this distracts from the action onstage — but then heightens identification with it.

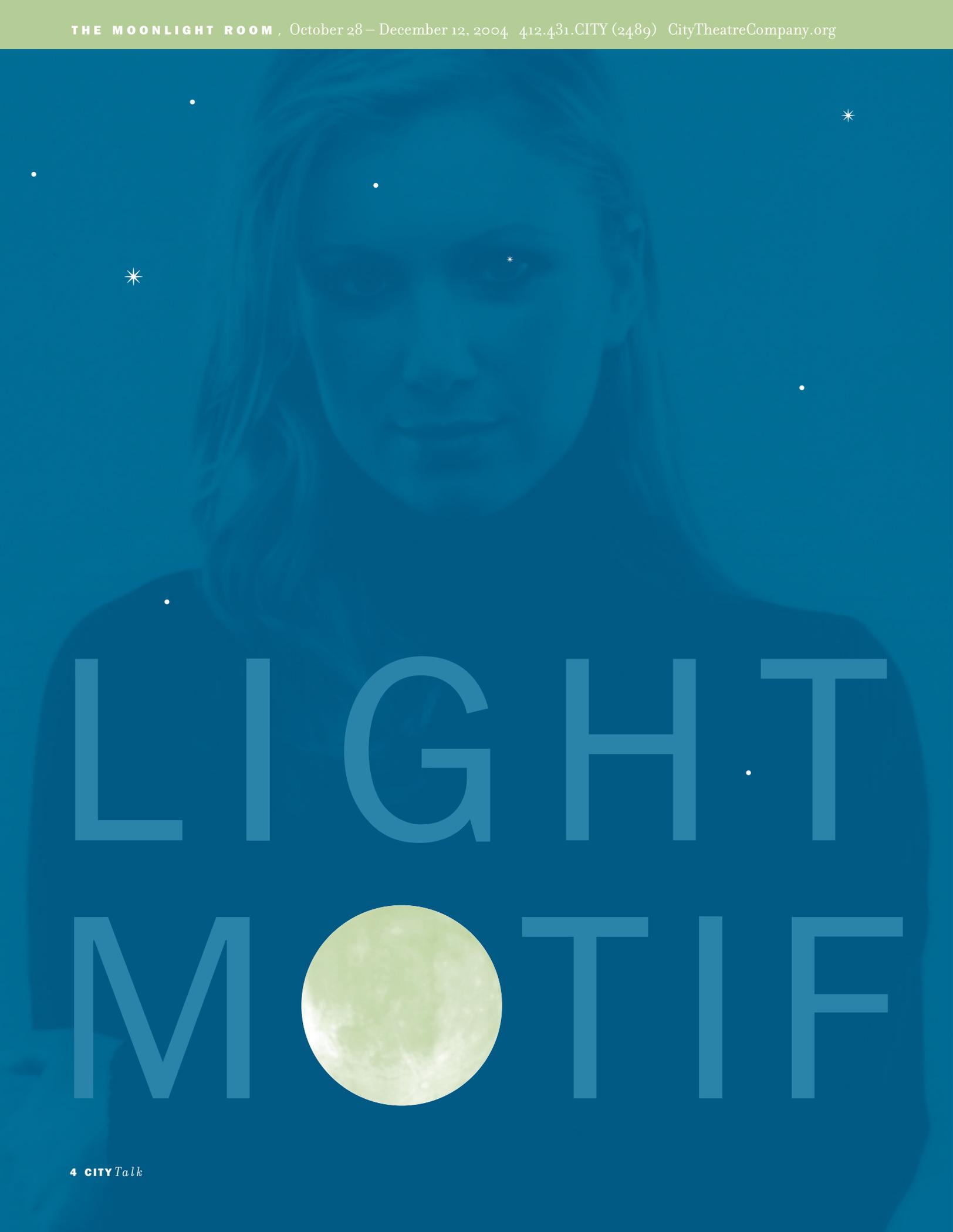
Sound designer Elizabeth Atkinson brilliantly merges the genuine music of nature with her own synthesized version, using the cicadas' buzzing song — a thematically relevant mating call — to rhythmic effect. As Atkinson builds the cicada song louder and louder, the lovers must adjust to be heard, becoming louder themselves. Finally, dual mating calls merge into one melodic sound, and the night itself seems to pulse with passionate repartee.

Director Roger Henderson's often poetic stage pictures build erotic intrigue, bringing the romantic feeling between Crewe and Das to a slow, low boil. Nudity is never displayed onstage, but its suggestion is always more powerful. At one point, Das glimpses the bare outline of Crewe's form as she disrobes within her leafy hut.

The acting is solid all around. Robin Walsh heads the cast as Flora Crewe. Delivering her speeches "trippingly on the tongue," she keeps Stoppard's often highly cerebral text in the realm of the emotional. Her character's love, Nirad Das, is given a poised, intensely ruminating quality by Sanjit De Silva.

The comically brilliant, but also dramatically effective Sunil Malhotra is at his funniest when attempting to seduce Crewe. Some of the warmest scenes in the play are due to the interaction between actors Susan McGregor-Laine and Rajesh Bose, who play Eleanor and Anish Das, respectively. Their arc from antagonism to empathy mirrors the arc Flora Crewe and Nirad Das take. Tien Domin delivers a short but memorable performance as a young Eleanor and, like her character's sister, also finds love in India.

Throughout the play, there is a quest for "rasa," which Silva (as Das) describes as "the emotion which the artist must arouse...a state of heightened delight." Thanks to the efforts of this talented group, the production is filled with moments that arouse just that.

A woman's face is centered in the background, rendered in a blue tint. The background is a solid blue color with several white stars of varying sizes scattered across it. The title 'LIGHT MOTIF' is written in large, blue, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image. The letter 'O' in 'MOTIF' is replaced by a circular image of a full moon with a yellowish-green hue.

LIGHT
MOTIF



Tristine Skyler's emotionally charged new work may be called *The Moonlight Room* but, ironically, the play hasn't a trace of moonlight in it and the room of the title is just an ideal, a fantasy that represents family and safety and home to one young character. Instead, the room in which the play does take place is inherently energized with high stakes, danger, and conflict. The setting is a hospital emergency room, and the quality of the light that fills Skyler's dramatic landscape is the harsh fluorescent lighting of the ER's waiting area.

Here Skyler examines the youth culture and family dynamics that have brought an apparently happy, well-adjusted teenager to overdose on drugs and caused his two friends to try to manage the situation themselves. When their parents find out what's going on and arrive, the importance of bridging the generation gap and finding common ground takes on a sense of life or death urgency.

For Skyler, 33, finding common ground with her teenage characters meant working with at-risk youth in a child advocacy center—it also meant reconnecting with her own youth, when she felt the need to experiment with risky lifestyle choices and watched some of her friends spin out of control.

Skyler chose to put her characters in a hospital waiting room because of a fascination that began when she adapted some stories by Joyce Carol Oates into a film that took place in a bus station waiting room. "I like writing about public space because I see it as a way to capture interweaving stories, the sense of different people's lives intersecting. There is a transitional quality to a waiting room, of people

at crossroads in their lives. In the case of *The Moonlight Room*, the characters lives are intersecting at a critical point."

Skyler, who had acted but never written for the stage, began the play "as an exercise" to see if she could use her experience in the theatre "to teach myself how to write in that medium." The result of this "exercise" was an outpouring of critical praise. *The New York Times* critic Bruce Weber called Skyler "a precocious talent," pointing to the spoken rhythms of her characters as "pitch-perfect."

Skyler's dialogue is a unique fusion of realism, theatricality, and humor. Her young characters speak in a combination of articulate, educated verbiage and unnervingly accurate street slang that highlights the presence of both promise and peril in their lives. Characters use humor to protect themselves, but they all slip into moments of near-soliloquy where brief glimpses are gained into their most private selves. "I am fascinated by how people escape themselves....How do they reveal, or hide, their true feelings? And the trick of writing, to me, is to reveal the characters to the audience in a way that doesn't betray them to themselves."

In the end, *The Moonlight Room* is a wake-up call for both parents and children to take a look at their relationships. There is a pervading sense of mixed hope and dread—hope that these children will make it through these years of risk unscathed, and dread that they too will end up among the ranks of "the lost and the missing," as one character calls post-9/11 New York. With a touch that is at once utterly specific, human, and humorous, Skyler expresses an urgent need to hold onto a sacred space of intergenerational connection like the moonlight room. "My most proud moments were when I saw parents leaving the theatre in New York, talking about it with their children."

—Gabriel Davis, *Literary Assistant*

The Art of the Theater

Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre begins their sixth season as a growing international force

By Gabriel Davis

The Gigli Concert

Lester Hamburg Studio, South Side
May 30-June 15
412.394.3353

The Theatre Communications Group website has every prominent United States theater listed as a member, from the Lincoln Center in New York to the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. The three Pittsburgh theaters listed are the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, the City Theatre and the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre (PICT). Of the three, PICT is currently the smallest, with the fewest subscribers, but its mere presence among the giants of the professional Pittsburgh theater scene speaks volumes of PICT's ambition to become a giant itself.

PICT is growing fast: Now a mid-sized, non-profit arts organization, it grosses approximately \$350,000 annually. Starting out six years ago with little over 700 people attending their inaugural season, PICT built attendance to 7,200 last year. With subscriptions up by over 30 percent this year, the theater company can expect to draw an even larger audience for their current eye-opening season, *The Art of the Story*. "The season was given its name," explains PICT artistic director and co-founder Andrew Paul, "because in each of the plays there is a story told or a fabrication created which is the central impetus for the events that unfold onstage."

When Paul started PICT in 1996 with partner Stephanie Riso, one of the primary goals on his agenda was to diversify Pittsburgh's theatrical offerings. "I'm trying to introduce some playwrights and work that might not have been seen by Pittsburgh theater audiences. I think [theatergoers] are generally quite sophisticated and can handle plays that the more traditional theaters seem wary to produce because they're perceived as 'too Irish' or 'too dark' for American audiences."

His theory has proven accurate. Today, the theater company's reputation is reaching beyond the city. "The key thing for me," says Paul, "is I want PICT to not only be a local group but a group that gets some sort of national reputation and is seen on an international level."

Paul came to Pittsburgh nine years ago to augment his theater background with an MBA in economics and political science at the University of Pittsburgh. A graduate of London's Guildford School of Acting, he found the city had few venues for theater professionals to make a living. When he would tell people from out of town that he worked in Pittsburgh theater, many were surprised to hear the city had a professional

theater circuit at all.

Two years following his arrival, the situation worsened when the Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival announced its close. It left Pittsburgh audiences with few options for seeing classical works, and theater pros with one less place in town to earn a living. "A lot of my friends had been part of the Shakespeare Company," says Paul, "and they had expressed an interest in a replacement company."

Another reason Paul founded PICT was to bring Pittsburgh some international attention as a destination for high-quality theater, a goal that has proven highly successful. "As for the interna-

there. They're celebrities there, paid 20,000 pounds a year so they can devote all their time to their art, and they don't pay taxes the rest of their lives." This generous support exists thanks to an exclusive arts organization in Ireland called AOSDANA.

This season PICT is up for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a major step for the company. "Being an NEA-granted organization would be very big indeed," says Paul, "a sign that PICT is seen as a national treasure, not just on the local level." An NEA sight visitor will be coming to judge PICT's season opener, *The Gigli Concert* by Tom Murphy.

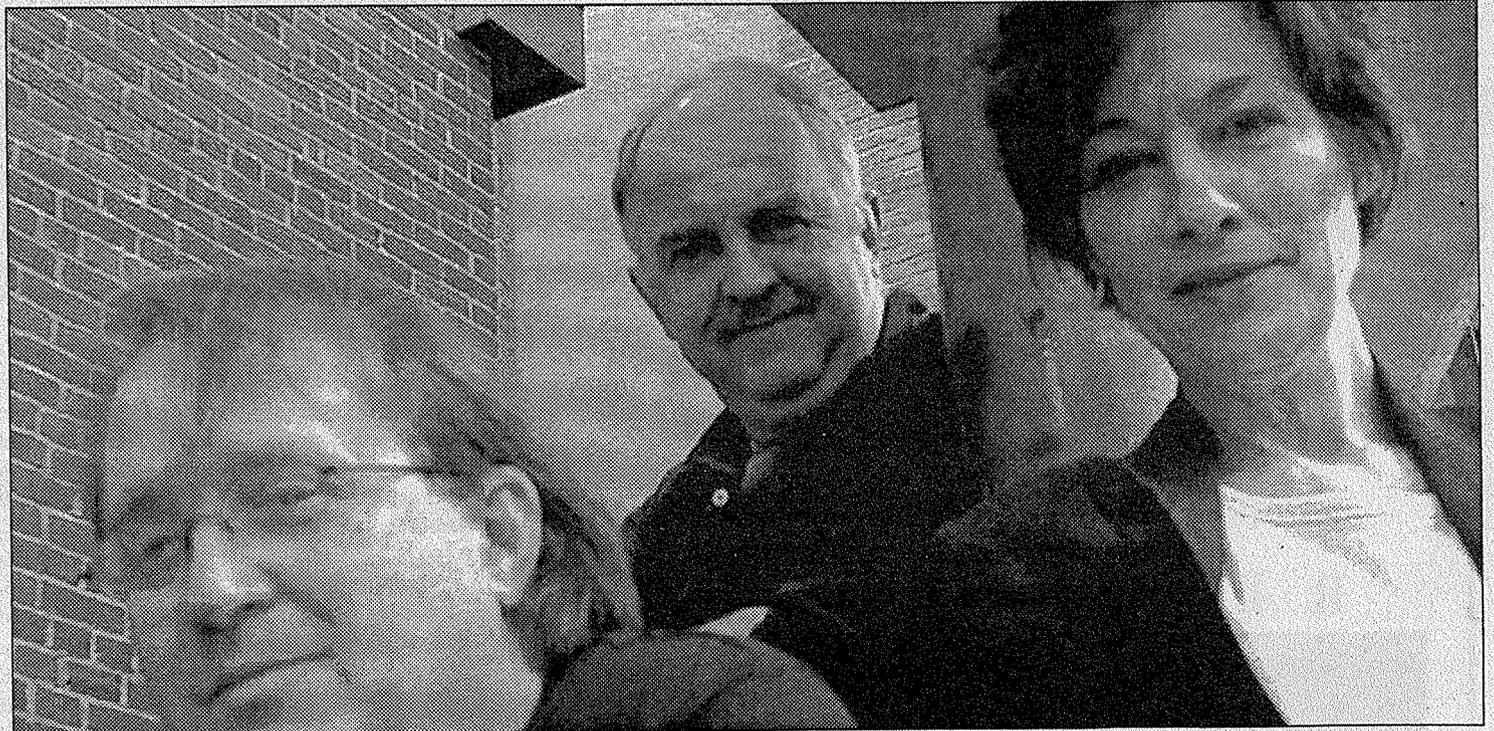
Murphy, a modern playwright with immense stature in Ireland, is also popular with American audiences; his skill with the quill was ranked as on par with James Joyce by the *New York Times*. His play follows two primary characters: JPW King — a "dynamatologist" who helps people realize the impossible — and a depressed Irishman, his client, who wants to sing like the great Italian tenor Gigli. A modern reworking of the Faust myth, with biting allusions to L. Ron Hubbard's *Scientology*, *The Gigli Concert* brings into question the limits of human potential.

explains, "which all get so mixed and matched as he goes along that by the end everyone is confused as to what the real events are."

In August, the season is wrapped up with Brian Friel's Obie-winning *Aristocrats*. The play was inspired by Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, in which a son fabricates this whole background and identity for himself as a way of trying to get out from under the shadow of his father. Both shows will be on the City Theatre Mainstage.

Paul will continue to build PICT's international reputation this season with a production slated to tour Ireland in October. "We did this play *Faith Healer* locally in 2000, and we're reviving it," Paul explains. "The play is about this man who goes from town to town — these little towns in Scotland, England, and Ireland. And he throws up this show, this faith healer experience. So we got this idea, wouldn't it be interesting to do just that: Why don't we just take this thing over there and hop from town to town and hit these little venues." *Faith Healer* plays October 8 at the Byham Theatre before heading off to Ireland.

The trip to Ireland will lay the groundwork for future tours, according to Paul. "What's really in demand over there [in Ireland] are more



Martin Giles, Larry John Myers and Caitlin Clarke star in *The Gigli Concert*, PICT's season opener.

tional public relations angle," Paul says, "I've established relations with these great Irish playwrights — Thomas Kilroy, Tom Murphy, Brian Friel, Marina Carr. The great thing about that is Pittsburgh is really benefiting in a lot of ways."

In addition to producing the works of those authors, PICT has attracted people like Melissa Sihra. This Trinity College doctoral scholar wrote a 15-page article on last season's *Portia Coughlan*, which will appear in a collection of essays about playwright Marina Carr's work and be published in Ireland.

Paul stresses the importance of Sihra's article. "In Ireland theater criticism is a big industry," he says. "The important playwrights are so huge

Breathing life into Murphy's characters are professional theater veterans Larry John Meyers and Martin Giles, as well as PICT newcomer Caitlin Clarke. Clarke, who plays JPW King's mistress, studied at Yale Drama, going on to work on Broadway and regionally with such talents as Kevin Kline, Raul Julia and John Malkovitch. Her film and television credits include *Dragonslayer*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Northern Exposure* and *Law and Order*. Paul, who will direct, says, "I expect to learn more from these actors during the process than vice versa."

The Art of the Story continues in July with the 18th-century comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. In keeping with the season's theme, the lead character "fabricates all these stories," Paul

traditional, classic pieces with a U.S. style of presentation," he explains. "There really seems to be a huge market for it, in large part because people love the theater there, and love having American companies come there."

Paul's vision for PICT extends far beyond the current year. His partner, Stephanie Riso, received approval to create a video archive for all the professional productions done in Pittsburgh. "It's modeled on the Lincoln Center Video Archive where almost everything done in New York is kept on file," Paul says. "Pittsburgh will be one of only four places in the country to have one." The archive will be kept at the University of Pittsburgh's Curtis Collection in Hillman Library.

Theater Review

Post-apocalyptic Puppet Show

Riddley Walker gets heavy-handed, but still entertains

Riddley Walker

By Russell Hoban

Pittsburgh Playhouse Repertory Company, Oakland

Through June 9

412.621.4445

Reviewed by Gabriel Davis

The Pittsburgh Playhouse Repertory Company wraps up their season with Russell Hoban's darkly comic *Riddley Walker*, a play with a driving impulse to which my inner-toddler can relate.

As a wee thing I understood well the sterile concept that I would be burned if I touched the hot stove, yet I had this compelling urge to see it happen for myself. The pain which ensued motivated me to dub such untoward impulses as "weird urges," and ignore them from that point forth.

In *Riddley Walker*, three millennia since all of civilization is blown up in a colossal nuclear war, a man named Abel Goodparley is gripped by a colossal "weird urge." Having only the idea of nuclear devastation as passed down for generations, Goodparley wants to see it happen for himself.

Still, he has a long way to go. Since the big blowup, mankind has reverted to a primitive hunter-gatherer existence. Goodparley, born with the stature to intimidate, rules, calling himself the "Pry Mincer." (In 3,000 years the word "prime minister" was bound to get jumbled.)

Goodparley is a massive hypocrite. While seeking the knowledge of mass-destruction for his own aggrandizement, he is simultaneously controlling his people via puppet shows — developed by his nuke-shocked forefathers — which warn against the pitfalls of science and technology.

Meanwhile, a young man named Riddley Walker unwittingly stumbles into information that will help Goodparley make what he believes to be the key to nuclear weaponry. In reality, it's the key to gunpowder, or some such primitive explosive.

Hoban's play is based on his novel of the same title, which won the Australian Science Fiction Achievement Award in 1982 and influenced depictions of the world in films like *Mad Max*. Pay attention to the way the tribe of children in the film speak, and you'll recognize it as the odd vernacular Hoban so skillfully creates. This is our spoken language as it might be after three millennia of backsliding and maleducation.

Fitting is the location Playhouse Rep has chosen for telling this tale. *Riddley Walker* is not

staged in the Playhouse's large theater at street level, but rather in a more claustrophobic basement space — effectively conjuring the feel of a fallout shelter.

Stephanie Mayer's scenic design immediately smacks of Beckett, with a large dirt-mound to one side of the stage and a small pile of sand to the other. Players emerge through holes in the walls and a concrete opening in the floor, clad in Joan Markert's appropriately dirt-encrusted, coarse fabrics.

The large cast is spirited and intense, but at times so loudly frenetic in such a small playing space as to be grating. Still, solid ensemble work is done as hunter-gatherers during the singing of a catchy song about Riddley Walker — no, this isn't a musical — as well as scenes with a pack of killer canines and a creepy, crawly mob of tortured souls.

Michael Tornetta as Riddley Walker is rakish and irreverent at the top of the play, aggressively pushing his youthful energy into the audience. At times I wanted to slink back a few rows. During the puppet shows, however, this energy engages. Tornetta produces a hilarious voice for his scientist puppet.

Peter Uribe's Abel Goodparley is deliciously dark. A searing presence, he stares out at his world with a piercing and edgy — but secretly bewildered — gaze. His hunger for knowledge is both genuine and amusing. In one scene he reads an ancient 20th-century document, trying to decode what he is sure must be a hidden message about how to make nukes. Under his brilliant scrutiny the word "crucifying" becomes "cruci-frying," meaning to heat in a crucible.

However, it is not until John Gresh comes along as Granser, the man with the forbidden knowledge Goodparley seeks, that one is fully brought into the world of the play. Gresh is refreshingly unaffected and one of the few low-key players in the ensemble, speaking Hoban's odd version of English as if it were his daily parlance.

Finally, director Rick Kemp waxes overly symbolic, placing the performance of the puppet show upon the grave of ages past. However, he also creates a wonderful image for Riddley's deep attunement to nature, hoisting him by a pulley skyward as he runs with a pack of wild dogs, literally on air.

In sum, there are bright spots in the evening, and Hoban's unique vernacular certainly fascinates, but at two and a half hours, the simple storyline is stretched too thin. What's left is scene after scene of heavy symbolism and allegory, overzealous acting and, with the preachy puppet shows, an oddly incongruous Mr. Rogers-esque didacticism.

Alan Ayckbourn

Alan Ayckbourn's talent for comedy is no joke: after struggling for 6 years, his first farce *Relatively Speaking* made a splash that literally changed his entire life – making him one of the most sought after comic playwrights of our time.

“...written whilst I was at the BBC, it [Relatively Speaking] wiped out my overdraft virtually overnight. Stephen Joseph had suggested that I try to write a ‘well made’ play (as opposed to this experimental nonsense I’d been indulging in). I tried to achieve this. It’s not that well made but it was the best I’d managed up till then. When he found it was over-running, characteristically he just tore the middle pages out at random. Despite this it seemed to work.”

– Alan Ayckbourn

The play opened on March 28, 1967 at the Duke of York's Theatre and was a massive success on the West End. To this day *Relatively Speaking* is one of Sir Alan's most popular and most produced plays.

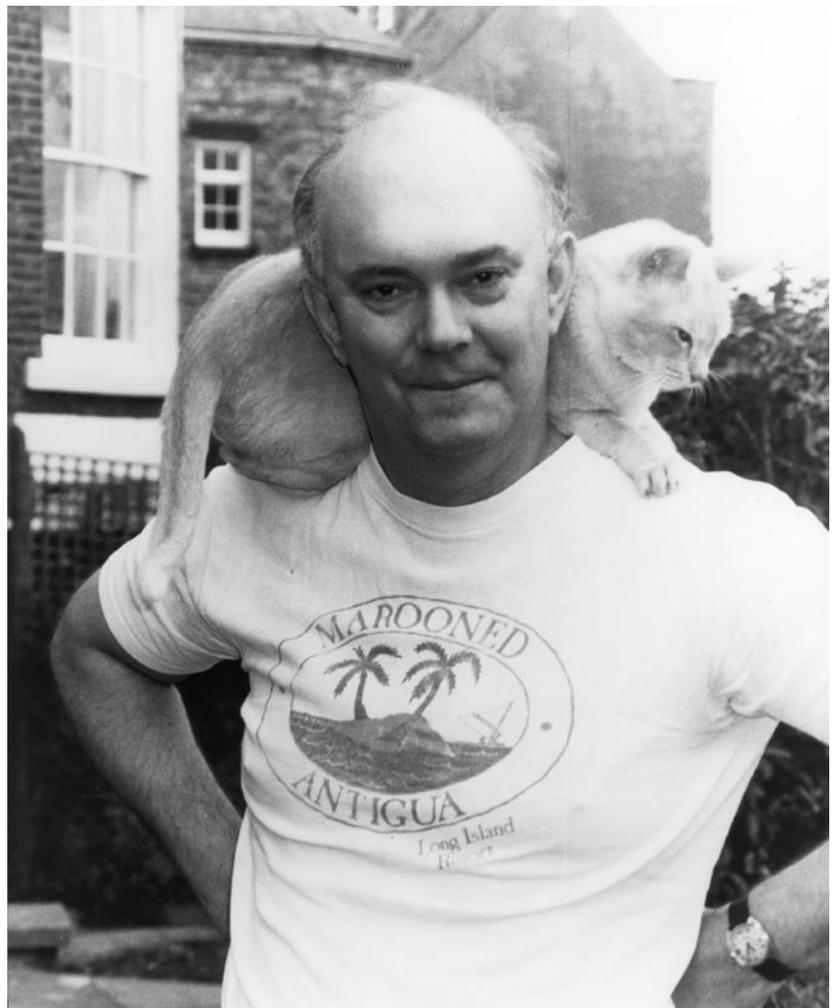
When commissioned to write the play by Stephen Joseph (then Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough), Sir Alan was working as a radio drama producer at the BBC in Leeds. *Relatively Speaking* marked the beginning of a theme central to much of Ayckbourn's work: men and women's inability to get along with each other.

In writing *Relatively Speaking* Ayckbourn also made connections which would prove invaluable throughout his career. When the play transferred to London, under the direction of Nigel Patrick, the character of Greg was played by a young Richard Briers. Briers would go on to brilliantly portray characters in many of Sir Alan's plays. And the success of *Relatively Speaking* cemented Ayckbourn's connection with the Stephen Joseph Theatre as a playwright (he'd been performing with them as an actor). To date seventy of his plays have premiered at SJT. Of those, over half have moved to the West End or National Theatre. In 2008, he will step down as SJT's Artistic Director after 36 years of service.

Ayckbourn's work has been translated into 40 languages and performed throughout the world. He's been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play for *Bedroom Farce* in 1979 and in 1976 won the Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatrical Experience for his trilogy of plays *The Norman Conquests: Living Together, Round and Round the Garden* and *Table Manners*. Nominations for the Drama Desk award include *Private Fears in Public Places* (2006), *Comic Potential* (2001) and *A Small Family Business* (1992). Ten of his shows have appeared on Broadway including *Absurd Person Singular* (1974-76 and a revival in 2005), *A Small Family Business* (1992), *Bedroom Farce* (1979) and with Andrew Lloyd Webber the musical *By Jeeves* (2001).

He has received a number of honorary degrees including the Montblanc de la Culture Award for Europe and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers Guild of Great Britain. A fellow at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he was honored with the title of Commander in the British Empire in 1987 and in 1997 Ayckbourn was knighted Sir Alan for services to the theatre.

Other plays by Ayckbourn include *Communicating Doors*, *How the Other Half Loves*, *Woman in Mind* and *House and Garden*. He has also written several children's plays including *Champion of Paribanou*, *Dad's Tale* and *Christmas v Mastermind*.



Alan Ayckbourn

Something Unexpected

Sometimes inspiration is merely the knack for recognizing a good idea when one hears it. In fact, the play's satisfying twist – involving the slippers Greg discovers under the bed – was reportedly suggested by Ayckbourn's agent during the pre-London tour of the play.



DONALD CORREN & JUDY KAYE/PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG

When I Met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses off – they were still singing. They buzzed like a locust on the coffee table and then ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch and knew that nails up there took a new grip on whatever they touched. “I am your own way of looking at things,” she said. “When you allow me to live with you, every glance at the world around you will be a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand. – William Stafford

Souvenir

(A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins)

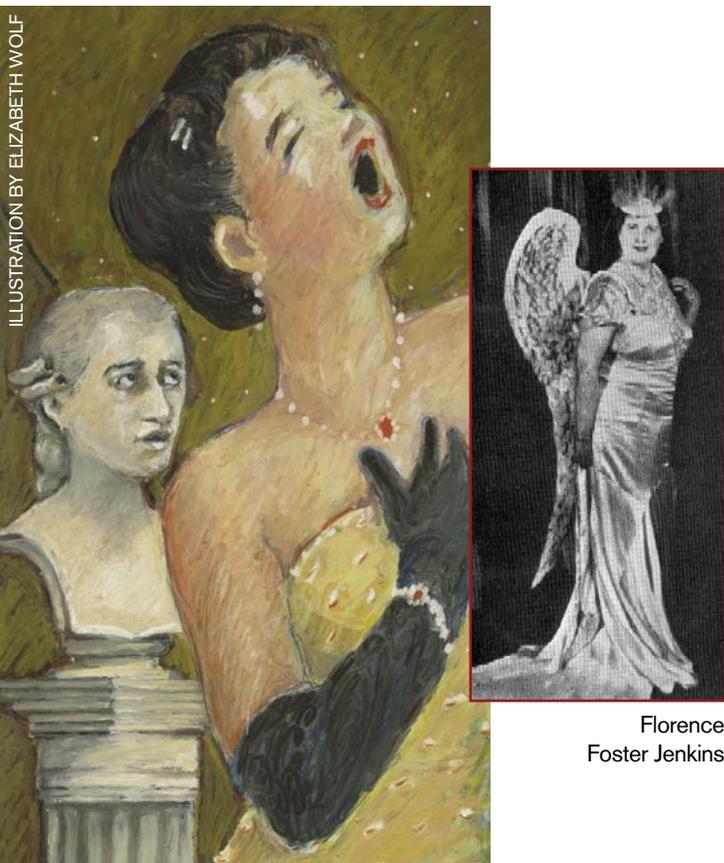
Souvenir – generally defined as an object one brings back from a trip – in French means literally: the act of remembering. That action is at the heart of Stephen Temperley’s play of the same name, wherein a struggling composer Cosme McMoon attempts to make peace with a lifetime of memories spent as accompanist to Florence Foster Jenkins – a wealthy socialite who despite all evidence to the contrary believed herself to be a truly extraordinary coloratura soprano. Based on real life events, Temperley tells a story that is at once funny and stirring. By filtering the events through McMoon’s narration, Temperley takes an insightful look at a musical career, which could easily have been perceived as nothing more than a joke and elevates it – making it universal. In his hands, Florence becomes a symbol for the childlike enthusiasm within all of us to play unabashedly at the very things we love, regardless of our ability. In this way, Temperley’s play speaks to everyone who harbors in his or her heart an unacknowledged untried artist.

~ continued inside ~

INSIDER'S INSIGHT

Written by Debra Baron, Director of Education
and Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

Available for download at westportplayhouse.org/souvenir.htm



Florence
Foster Jenkins

The Voice in Lady Florence's Head (and in yours, too)

Lady Florence heard sublime melody when she sang, yet everyone else heard something quite different. For our purposes, let's call this "the shower effect" because so many are familiar with it. For those of us not blessed with perfect pitch, the "shower effect" is that all too common phenomena where our own singing sounds great in the shower, but when we hear it on tape or friends hear it at a karaoke bar – well, the sound is something quite different from the one in our head. What makes for such a glaring contrast?

The science of it is actually quite simple. When other people hear us speak their delicate seashell-shaped ears are picking up vibrations in the air generated by our own voice and passing through those delicate ears, a bunch of little bones in the head and their cochlea – a coiled tapered tube in the inner ear that is the primary sensory organ of hearing. The sound is then transmitted to the hearing department of the brain and translated into meaningful words and phrases.

However, when we hear our own voice what we are picking up is not so much the air vibrations that our voices create and others receive, but the vibrations our vocal chords send to our ear through our head bones and muscles and sinuses. All that changes the sound significantly. So when we hear ourselves speak – or sing – more or less what we are hearing is the voice inside our head: a private, personal voice whose specific beauty is ours and ours alone to know and appreciate.

"What matters most is the music you hear in your head"

– *Souvenir's* Florence Foster Jenkins

Opera

*O singer, if thou canst not dream,
Leave this song unsung*

– Originally from "Die Mainacht" by Brahms:
notation on Florence Foster Jenkins 1934 program

In exploring the passion of Florence Foster Jenkins, *Souvenir* examines the incredible power of Opera – a form which can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, where dramas often included an occasional song from the choir which served to further the plot. In the 1500s, one of the most popular forms of music in Europe was a madrigal, a song with a minimum of three distinct voices singing different words at different times. As the story in the music became more valued, audiences found the multiple voices of the madrigal muddling the narrative, making it hard if not impossible to follow. To solve the problem, recitatives were invented – a technique in which the accompaniment holds a note while one singer sings the musical line.

In 1594 Italian composer Jacopo Peri used recitatives in composing the very first opera, *Dafne*. Later, Peri wrote a piece of music, which was performed between acts in the comedy *La Pellegrina*, and so the intermezzo – the musical interlude – was born. When Peri composed his second opera, *L'Euridice* he utilized both recitative and intermezzo. By combining the styles of recitatives, intermezzo and that sacred music-drama style of oratorio, Claudio Monteverdi created opera's first masterpiece, *L'Orfeo*, which premiered in Mantua, Italy in 1607 and is still performed regularly today.

And while opera may be among the oldest art forms to endure through the ages in many ways unchanged, it still speaks to even the younger generations today. Just look at the popularity of singers like Andrea Bocelli, Josh Groban and Charolette Church – with the latter two incorporating opera into many of their albums as well. Among the fastest growing audiences at the opera are Generation X-ers, whose attendance increased nearly twenty percent in recent years. And overall, opera is among the fastest growing of the performing arts – with more than 20 million people of all ages attending every year.

And opera continues to inspire and inform other art forms. For instance its impact on musical theatre is unmistakable: Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* is based on Verdi's Opera of the same name, *Miss Saigon* is based on *Madame Butterfly*, and *Rent* on

La Boheme. Operatic elements pervade modern cinema as well, for example: *Fatal Attraction*, *A Room with a View*, *Philadelphia*, *Diva*, *Life is Beautiful*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *The Fifth Element* – with this final example featuring a striking blue woman (an extraterrestrial) performing opera aboard an interstellar cruise ship; a projection by the filmmaker that even in two hundred and fifty more years opera will continue to captivate.

"Music was my refuge.

*I could crawl into
the spaces between the
notes and curl my
back to loneliness"*

– Maya Angelou

For modern audiences, accustomed to film and television filled with special effects, the expectation is for entertainment that dazzles the senses with breathtaking sound and spectacle. Opera fulfills that promise. With lush sets and costumes, phenomenal voices, and stories with universal appeal and emotional truths that span time and transcend the fad-oriented popular music of the day – opera is as relevant today as when it was born (in its earliest incarnation) in Ancient Greece.

Theater Review

Screwball Comedy, Restoration Style

PICT production gets ridiculous but keeps the laughs coming

SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

By Oliver Goldsmith
Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theater
City Theatre, South Side
Through July 27
412.394.3353

Reviewed by Gabriel Davis

Welcome to Oliver Goldsmith's world of Restoration comedy, where, if one is willing to suspend one's disbelief, one can enjoy the sublime machinations and plot twists of the genre. With a series of confusions that often snowball into hilariously embarrassing situations, *She Stoops to Conquer* takes its audience on a fun, if ridiculous, ride.

Meet Sir Charles Marlow, a blustery, swaggering young gentlemen who exudes confidence with women of all classes but his own. Put this sometime Don Juan with a well bred young lady of his social sphere and watch him sputter and stutter himself into a spineless mass of blathering idiocy.

Matched up with Miss Hardcastle by his father, Marlow is too bent out of shape even to look her in the face. But being a proactive young lady, and taken by Marlow's good looks, Miss Hardcastle decides to go undercover as a servant girl and find out what he is really made of. A romance ensues, but Marlow may not have a chance with her: He's not only under the false impression that she is a servant but also believes he's visiting an inn rather than the Hardcastle house. Thinking Squire Hardcastle (played by Roger Jerome) the innkeeper, Sir Charles treats him accordingly by ordering him around. A cast of supporting spunky servants, a second pair of featured lovers, a meddling mother and Miss Hardcastle's buffoon of a brother fill out and complicate the action.

My concern with this play, and in fact with all the Restoration comedies I've seen or read, is the utter two-dimensionality of the characters. On the other hand, stock characters are typical of this genre, and *She Stoops to Conquer* succeeds thanks to the complex plot construction. Quite simply, it's funny.

The play's "buffoon" character, Tony Lumpkin, is one such stock character in most respects, yet he is imbued by Goldsmith with a touch more complexity. This comes as no surprise, as Lumpkin is very much the theatrical incarnation of Goldsmith himself.

Like his author, Lumpkin is an awkward social presence: pockmarked and overweight, he comes off as an idiot, but possesses a quick wit and an able mind. Spoiled rotten by a mother whom he resents for keeping him a child, Lumpkin is the Restoration equivalent of the party animal — a raucous, joyful presence especially when drunk, and also a prankster. Bent



Colleen Delany (left) and Tessa Klein (right) play spirited characters in *She Stoops to Conquer*.
Photo by Suellen Fitzsimmons

on helping others realize their heart's desires throughout the play, his own seem to get lost. And, often reviled by those around him despite his efforts on their behalf, he is not only the unsung hero of the play but also its saddest, most tragic figure.

This gem of a role requires an actor capable of motivating his comic buffoonery with the pain of a social outsider and with the hostility one would expect of this alienated soul. Actor Matthew Gaydos is up to the challenge, his Lumpkin glowering at Marlow and his friend Hastings when he encounters them.

Melanie Dreyer's direction hooks into Lumpkin's emotional life wonderfully. After being turned upon by all the other characters onstage, Dreyer has Lumpkin slump to the floor, staring up at the cast from the background, sulking and finding some solace in a hunk of bread.

As the characters reveal their pain and discomfort at having their desires thwarted, the play becomes funnier. Michael Fuller is masterful as Hastings, skillfully finding that perfect balance between comic detachment and emotional involvement as he pursues his romantic ends. As Miss Hardcastle, Tessa Klein displays a similar aptness. Her anxiety is palpable as she listens to her father's disapproving words about Marlow. And though she hams it up throughout, she never lets the audience lose track of what her character wants and needs in each scene.

As Marlow, Darren Elikier is a gigantic ham, and I loved every porkin' minute of it. Going from sleazy pimp to trembling imp in the blink of an eye, Elikier's sudden and highly embarrassing revelations — of things like his girlfriend and her father's true identities — had me smiling and chuckling throughout.

Barbara Russell is a pleasure as the domineering but foolish Mrs. Hastings. She reaches her comic peak when Lumpkin leads her in circles for 40 miles through her own backyard. Afterwards, she believes she's completely lost and, upon seeing her husband, takes him for a vicious highwayman. Like I said, suspension of disbelief is necessary, but it's truly fun.

Matthew York's scenic design was pretty and elegant, simply conjuring picturesque woods and rich interiors — and very Restoration, complete with roll-in flats and a picture-frame view into the action.

In all, Dreyer effectively pushes the play along at a comfortable pace with efficient, motivated blocking that expertly showcases the many gags and bits. And despite some moments where over-the-top acting became too big, in general the production finds the right balance.

GOODNIGHT DESDEMONA (GOOD MORNING JULIET)

By Anne-Marie MacDonald
Unseam'd Shakespeare
Lester Hamburg Studios, South Side
Through July 27
412.394.3353

Reviewed by L.L. Kirchner

Maybe, like me, you're a little rusty on your Shakespeare and wonder about keeping up with *Good Night Desdemona* (*Good Morning Juliet*). Fear not. As themes from *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* are part of everyday life, from movie plots to ad campaigns, the universal points are easy to grasp.

Written by Canadian Ann-Marie MacDonald, the story goes that our heroine, Constance Ledbelly (Jessica D. Morgan), is rotting away at Queens University, working on a lunatic thesis about the Bard as she faithfully promotes the career of her professor, Claude Night. Whacked out on Coors Light and Velveeta, Constance enters the world of Cyprus and then Verona, in person. She's there, interacting with the characters in iambic pentameter, discovering their true personalities and tweaking the plays' outcomes.

It's hysterical. Rod Serling (Jarrod Fry) sets the stage with a *Twilight Zone* intro about the magical alchemy you're about to witness. Desdemona (Bryn Jameson) and Constance deliver extremely witty dialogue about the Amazons of Academe. Constance continues to fret about how her cats are faring without her