

Let's Do the Time Warp Again: "Arcadia," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through August 26

River Cities Reader – August 22, 2007 - by Mike Schulz

Watching *Arcadia*, the Tom Stoppard jigsaw puzzle currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, is like watching a really engrossing foreign-language film without subtitles. You may not understand what's going on, but the actors and director seem to, so you strive to make sense of the proceedings through the performers' inflections, reactions, and occasional lines of dialogue where the meaning is evident. You find yourself desperately wanting to *get* it.

Yet, for this *Arcadia* viewer, at least, the strain proved too great. Just when I was beginning to grasp one of the playwright's heady, cleverly phrased theories of math, or theories of attraction, or theories of *theory*, he'd presented about five or six more; it seemed as though I was constantly racing after Stoppard and never caught up. Richmond Hill's production of *Arcadia*, under the direction of Jennifer Kingry, will likely make you feel either incredibly smart or incredibly stupid. No points for guessing how I felt.

I've heard that *Arcadia* is a beautiful read, and considering the playwright's gifts for structural precision, witty conversation, and perfectly elocuted *bon mots*, I have no reason to think otherwise. (Certainly the print version has a built-in advantage: You can back up and re-read passages you didn't comprehend the first time around.)

Stoppard's offering takes place at an English country estate during two parallel time frames: in 1809, when houseguest Septimus Hodge (Aaron Sullivan) tutors a teenage math prodigy (Carrie Clark) while an unseen Lord Byron vacations in an adjacent room; and in the present day, when authors Hannah Jarvis (Jessica Nicol) and Bernard Nightingale (Chris White) squabble over the historical accuracy and significance of Hodge's and Byron's visits, while mathematician Valentine Coverly (Jeremy Mahr) works through the prodigy's algorithms.

There's more (oh, God, is there more), including several scandalous affairs, a potential duel, a mute houseboy, and an uncooperative turtle, but I'd rather not give the impression that I understood more than I did.

I'll readily accept a healthy dose of responsibility for being so stymied by the piece, as I didn't peruse *Arcadia*'s program before the show began; if I had, I would've found its "glossary of themes and names" and its collection of 19 "other interesting things to know," which might've cleared up some confusion about who was whose lover, and who owned which property, and what Fermat's Last Theorem had to do with anything. (According to the *New York Times*, which I thank for what post-*Arcadia* comprehension I've amassed, the show's Broadway playbill included several companion pieces on mathematics, classicism, Romanticism, and Byron.)

However, I'm of the mind that it shouldn't require two pages of background information to enjoy a play - not one performed in *English*, at any rate - so it's entirely possible that I'm simply too *dense* for *Arcadia*, as I can't pinpoint exactly what might have been wrong with the production itself. (Based on Friday night's show, others may have felt as I did; the audience seemed unusually fidgety - there was a lot of rifling through programs - and even unusually *talkative*.)

Kingry's staging and pacing were impressive, and not only were there were no bum performances, but quite a few *outstanding* ones. Michael B. Miller and Stan Weimer delivered brief, topnotch character turns, Nicol and White sparred with great finesse, and it was a thrill seeing so many talents enlisted from the Shakespeare troupe the Prenzie Players (Sullivan, Mahr, Clark, Maggie Woolley, Matt Moody), who appeared focused, committed, and keenly intelligent.

You can feel the audience's collective relief during the cast's more overtly comedic bits - Woolley's coy flirtation with White, Sullivan's caustic undermining of Ken Ohr's houseguest, Nicol's and White's sarcastically incredulous one-upmanship - and the actors do what they can to lighten or even *disguise* the esotericism. But it doesn't seem there's much they *could* do. Just about every conversation is concerned solely with intangibles; characters are forever theorizing and hypothesizing, and when they're not, they're discussing figures, such as Byron, who don't exist on-stage. In the end, my main beef with the production lies with the material itself: There's far too much telling and not nearly enough showing.

And as much as I traditionally adore Richmond Hill's theatre-in-the-round setup, I'll venture that it's probably not the ideal way to experience *Arcadia*, as Stoppard's dialogue practically has a proscenium arch built into it; for full understanding of what's being said, it's important not only to see characters orating but the reactions of those they're orating *to*. (We miss out on much of the dialogue's import by only seeing the backs of heads.)

Richmond Hill's production is just engaging and intriguing enough to make me eager to read Stoppard's script. Whether I'll ever want to see *Arcadia* again is another matter entirely.

Well done comedy an acquired taste

Quad City Times - August 23, 2007 - by Ruby Nancy

It is not every day in this market that we get a chance to see a Tom Stoppard comedy, so fans of this unique writer must be thrilled to get the chance to see "Arcadia," which opened last weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theater.

A mix of a costumed period piece and a modern comedy of manners, "Arcadia" takes its name from the fictional pastoral paradise of Greek literature that proved so popular among painters and writers during the Renaissance. Program notes even cite and show the Nicolas Poussin painting, "Et in Arcadia, Ego," which reminds us that death and sorrow exist even in the most idyllic setting.

Given the emotionally engaging nature of Stoppard's play and the events it references, this high-brow pedigree is exactly right — and audiences need to remember this is not a low-brow comedy reliant on slapstick or innuendo for all its laughs.

In fact, whether you are brushing up on a liberal arts education or reading about some of the subject matter for the first time, taking time to peruse the program notes is a great idea. Some of the laughs — and quite a few of the chuckles — are dependent on knowing a smattering of art, literature, architecture and science, and even a scant acquaintance with the information provided will make the play more enjoyable.

Interwoven with all the brainiac discussions are plenty of racy gossip and speculation, a romance or two, witty banter fueled by sexual tension, and everything else — from an adroitly-handled cuckold to an attempted seduction. Director Jennifer Kingry has assembled an impressive cast for this show, which — though set in a single room — moves back and forth between 1809 and 2007 until the final scene, which is set in both 1812 and 2007.

Aaron Sullivan stars as Septimus Hodge, a tutor whose love of teaching and sheer brilliance are surpassed, it seems, only by his appetite for the after-hours company of a lady (and not always the same one). Sullivan brings a placid demeanor to Septimus that belies the intellectual and emotional activity taking place inside. His unharried way with his pupil and her many questions makes those scenes a lot of fun — where in lesser hands they might have seemed a bit creepy — and his attentive, expressive face conveys many things his spoken lines do not.

Carrie Clark does fine work as the young scholar, Thomasina Coverly, blending plaintive youth and mathematical brilliance well. Her recitation of the latest tales she's heard from the servants is the perfect opening for the first scene. As Jellaby, a gossipy old butler, Stan Weimer earns his own laughs, and Ken Ohr is entertaining as Ezra Chater, a none-too-bright husband whose bluster exceeds his brains.

In the contemporary scenes, where scholars puzzle over what exactly took place in the early 1800, Jessica Nicol does excellent work as Hannah, an author whose ascerbic observations provoke laughs from us and all kinds of reactions from the other characters — especially from Bernard Nightingale (played by Chris White). My favorite contemporary scene is the one where Hannah constantly interrupts Bernard's rehearsal of his latest lecture, where she scores big simply by the repeated raising of her hand and the occasional interjection of one or two words. This sequence is pure comedy, and it proves to be so well done as to be thoroughly enjoyable.

White's gravelly voice and impassioned style are perfect for Bernard's blustery ways, and he easily provides the energy and intellectual braggadocio required here. Maggie Woolley is hilarious as the ostensibly blonde Chloe, who sets her cap for Bernard — to great comic effect. As scientist Valentine Coverly, Jeremy Mahr is superb, giving understated readings to his every line. Jake Rathman does nice work as a mysterious young man who seems to always be hanging around.

As a whole, the show is wonderfully done, and the laughs — while not always huge — are frequent enough to deserve the comedy designation. The touching moments also make it more than worthwhile, and — though the material might be off-putting to some because it requires actual thought — this is a fine show that deserves a larger audience.

Though it may not be theater or comedy paradise for everyone, I thoroughly enjoyed "Arcadia."

Richmond Hill's 'Arcadia' proves arcane

Dispatch/Argus – August 24, 2007 - by Julie Jensen

The current offering of the Richmond Hill Players, "Arcadia" by Tom Stoppard, is arcane, which is defined as "understood by very few."

Two groups of people, separated by almost two centuries, occupy the same room in an English country estate, switching back and forth through time until the seventh and final scene, in which they are together without really realizing it.

In the 1800s, Septimus Hodge, played by Aaron Sullivan, tutors the precocious Thomasina Coverly, played by Carrie Clark, who discovers the mathematical concept of fractals.

The estate is abuzz with romantic liaisons and couplings, is visited by famous and unknown poets, and undergoes a radical change in landscaping.

The present-day group comprises descendants of the first -- Chloe Coverly, played provocatively by Maggie Woolley, and Valentine Coverly, played by Jeremy Mahr, who takes his pet turtle, Lightning, for his run and shares his lunch with the critter. He's working on Thomasina's theories of chaos with his computer.

The other contemporary occupants are Hanna Jarvis, played by Jessica Nicol, who writes about the history of gardens, and Bernard Nightingale, played by Chris White, a conceited academic researching Lord Byron.

Stan Weimer is a butler named Jellaby in the first group; Ken Ohr is the minor poet Ezra Chater; Kate Roth is Lady Croom, who bounces from one bed to another; Michael B. Miller is Richard Noakes, the garden designer who catches the tutor in a carnal embrace in the gazebo; and Matt Moody is Capt. Brice, who has an affair with Ezra Chater's wife, thus providing her husband with entree into the estate.

Jake Rathman is in both segments as Gus/Augustus, speechless and spooked in the first, interacting more normally in the second.

Although he is never seen onstage, Lord Byron is a distinct presence. He and the tutor attended Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, at the same time.

The scene where the tutor burns three letters has enough of a blaze to set the theater on fire, but fortunately doesn't.

Carrie Clark is an appealing Thomasina, but at times it is hard to make out her lines. The same can be said for other characters, as they turn their backs on the audience frequently. When she turned her back, it was hard to refrain from leaving one's seat to zip up her gown.

Billed as a comedy, "Arcadia" comes through with lines like "It is your duty as her tutor to keep her in ignorance."

The set -- a long table surrounded by chairs and covered with books, plus a side cabinet -- works well for both periods, and the costume changes are frequent.

Jennifer Kingry is both director and technical director for this show, also working on set design and painting. She says "Arcadia" has been "a mad passion" for her since she first read it.

Some members of the audience felt differently about it. The people beside me slept through Act I and didn't stick around for Act II.

East Moline native finds calling in Q-C theater scene

Dispatch/Argus – August 19, 2007 - by Claudia Loucks

When he was growing up, Jeremy Mahr never imagined he would be on stage, performing in front of people. But he is doing just that, portraying Valentine Coverly in Richmond Hill's "Arcadia."

"I love the Hill's intimate theater in the round space," he said. "It's a very funny show with a lot going on in it. I didn't know that talking about math and grouse could be so much fun."

"Val (his character) is a smart guy whose mind is mostly on the thing he's studying at the time, so he can be seen as an eccentric egghead who doesn't know what's going on. He flirts with Hannah, who is researching a book at his family's estate, but Val is usually giving more attention to his pet tortoise than to Hannah."

Mr. Mahr said he once considered himself a shy person. "I used to be shy around people I didn't know very well," he said. "I guess I just wanted everyone to like me."

Growing up in the East Moline area, he said he was an avid reader and enjoyed artistic expression such as writing short stories and poems, drawing, and sculpting.

"By the time I entered high school, most of those activities fell by the wayside," he said.

After graduating from United Township High School, he said he had "an on-again-off-again" college education. In 2004, he enrolled at Black Hawk College where he was offered a theater scholarship by the head of the theater department, Dan Haughey.

He studied acting and directing from Melissa Coulter and said, "Melissa was great. She encouraged us to find what interested us as individuals in theater without imposing any of her own views on us."

At about the same time in his life, Mr. Mahr auditioned for ComedySportz and was accepted into their training program.

"It was a crazy time for me," he said. "Suddenly I was getting up in front of people and pretending to be someone else. I thought it was pretty ironic that I could find myself portraying a character, but I was ready to roll with it."

He became involved with Playcrafters in Moline when he said he was encouraged to audition for a part in "Murder in Green Meadows," which was under the direction of a classmate from Black Hawk College, Angela Rathman, Geneseo.

Admitting that he had so much fun in that production, he decided to audition for a part in the Richmond Hill Players presentation of "Over the Tavern," and was cast as Mrs. Rathman's husband.

He also was in "Perfect Wedding," staged by the Richmond Hill Players.

"On a whim I auditioned for the Prenzie Players' 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' and was given the role of Lysander," he said.

Mr. Mahr became more involved with the Prenzie Players and played Henry Bullingbrook in their "Henriad," and also was assistant director for "Henry V," the final installment of that trilogy.

He will be co-directing "Taming of the Shrew," with Tracy Skaggs for Prenzie Players in 2008.

When Mr. Mahr is not acting, directing or doing what he refers to as "other theater craziness," he works at his family's day-care center, In a Kid's World, located in Rock Island.

"It's funny that many times we're looking elsewhere for the things we need, but for me, it ended up being right under my nose -- theater in the Quad-Cities and joining the family business," he said. "I guess I took some acting advice to heart and lived in the moment thereby finding a job, a hobby, and also a great girlfriend, Erin."