

Richmond Hill's "Seed" chilling, thrilling

Quad City Times - October 14, 2005 - by Ruby Nancy

Maxwell Anderson's "Bad Seed," based on the 1950s-era novel by William March, opened in New York about nine months after the original novel was published, which was something of a feat. While some films these days seem to be mass-merchandised and published in book form within weeks of their run in theaters, things didn't usually move that fast in 1954.

Set in a time and place when "fast" meant a woman who wore pants, this disturbing thriller managed to fascinate readers and theater-goers (and in 1956, movie audiences), and it has continued to do so over the years. The production of "Bad Seed" currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill., carries on that tradition easily, providing a chilling look into the frighteningly real world of Christine Penmark, who has the uneasy suspicion that her perfectly polite daughter may not be all she seems.

This stylized production, helmed so ably by director Jalayne Riewerts, stars Melissa Scott as Christine and is the Richmond Hill debut of Hannah Waller, who plays the title role of little Rhoda Penmark. Scott's work stays within the plasticized sensibility called for in the material, yet her Christine is also a moving, sympathetic character who provides the emotional center of this dramatic work. As a touchstone for the fears of an entire generation of parents as well as for today's audiences, she does fine work.

Waller is simply wonderful as the true "Bad Seed," lending a deliberately charming exterior to the face of evil, and her performance will — truly — creep you out in ways you never thought possible. The darling of her family and neighborhood, beloved by almost everyone, little Rhoda executes perfect deportment — and anyone who gets in her way — with equal ease, and Waller's work is both simple and brilliant.

Another standout in the cast is Don Faust, who plays Leroy, a creepy building janitor who scuttles in to empty garbage cans every so often. Faust is virtually unrecognizable here, adopting mannerisms, posture, vocal inflection and gestures that are completely Leroy's, and — as disgusting as the slobbering slime-bucket is — this character is possibly the best work I've ever seen him do.

Other performers also do nice work, including Kevin Brake, whose realistic work as a doting, if absent, father is very nice, and Reginald Tasker, who appears as a crime novelist. Eugenia Giebel also turns in a fine supporting performance as Miss Fern, a school headmistress whose veneer of prim civility does not fully disguise the doubt and fear Rhoda rouses in her. As a nosy, talky neighbor, Diane Greenwood lends a vintage style to her character that works well.

As the mother of another child at the Fern school, Stacy McKean is also very good. Likewise, Cal Taylor pulls off a turn as Christine's elderly father, with excellent (if almost too much for the intimacy of the space at Richmond Hill) stage makeup and a slight tremor that age him to fit the character. And Mike Skiles plays two small roles with excellent contrast, enough that audience members who aren't paying close attention might not realize that the characters are played by the same performer.

Great period costumes add to the polish of this show as well, especially the clothing worn by Scott, who gets a number of really great outfits. I also enjoyed the parade of red and red-trimmed costumes worn by Waller, which provided a subtle, telling metaphor for the character's bloody mindset. Giebel and McKean also get to wear some great period stuff as well.

As usual, Riewerts has crafted a fine work, and no one who has seen her previous directing projects could possibly be surprised by the show's quality. What I can count on, however, is the buildup of tension necessary to make this show work — punctuated by the occasional, and welcome, laugh — and the script's finale makes it all worthwhile.

Don't miss it.

Richmond Hill's "Bad Seed" thrives on fine acting

Argus/Dispatch - October 13, 2005 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "The Bad Seed" is edge-of-the-seat entertainment that shouldn't be missed.

Director Jalayne Riewerts keeps this tale of hideous heredity moving briskly until the moment when the audience exhales shakily and returns to reality.

Rhoda Penmark, a perfect 8-year-old whose true nature is shockingly brutal, lives a lie. If you've got something she wants, she'll get it -- and you. The major bone of contention at present is a penmanship medal won by a boy in her school, and he winds up drowned.

The star of this show is Hanna Waller, the Geneseo fifth-grader who plays Rhoda. Her dimples make both her pretenses and her genuine glee totally believable, and she really knows how to throw a tantrum.

Melissa Scott takes the demanding role of Christine Penmark, Rhoda's mother. Her past holds the secret that explains what is happening in the present. She must be emotionally exhausted at the end of a performance, having wept, screamed and grieved.

Kevin Brake appears at the beginning and the end as Col. Kenneth Penmark, Rhoda's father, away from home on military duty.

Diane Greenwood is Monica Breedlove, the Penmarks' landlady. She is deep into psychology and has met Sigmund Freud. She adores Rhoda and says, "I wish she were mine."

Mike Skiles has dual roles as Emory Wages, Monica Breedlove's brother, and Dwight Daigle, father of the drowned boy. He's careful to change his body language as he makes the switch, but it's a bit disconcerting at first.

Stacy McKean is Hortense Daigle, the dead boy's mother, who makes drunken visits to the Penmark apartment, and she does evoke pity.

Don Faust is Leroy, the lowlife man-of-all-work in the apartment complex. He challenges Rhoda, which proves that he's not as smart as he thinks he is, and he pays dearly for it.

Eugenia Giebel is Miss Fern, who operates the school Rhoda attends and says the girl knows something she isn't telling; Archie Williams is Reginald Tasker, the murder-mystery writer who offers the bad-seed theory; and Cal Taylor is Richard Bravo, Christine Penmark's father -- or so she has thought all her life.

I'm not going to tell you how it plays out, because seeing how it all falls into place is something you should experience on your own. Fine acting and directing combine to make it happen just as it should, and the final scene is a gasper.

Richmond Hill Plants a Not-'Bad Seed'

River Cities' Reader - October 13, 2005 - by Mike Scuultz

Richmond Hill's production of Maxwell Anderson's *The Bad Seed* is entertaining stuff, yet you might not *believe* more than a few words of it. The sincerity that director Jalayne Riewerts gives the piece is admirable, but also a little misguided, because the show often aims for penetrating insight and forgets why audiences love *The Bad Seed* in the first place -- not for its psychology, but because of the inherent fun in watching an eight-year-old sociopath get away with murder.

In the play, young wife and mother Christine Penmark (Melissa Scott) comes to believe that her daughter, Rhoda (Hanna Waller), has drowned a fellow student, and much of the work is devoted to Christine's gradual realization that she just might have given birth to a remorseless killer. For audiences, though, there's nothing "gradual" about it -- Rhoda is so aggressively chipper and inhumanly perfect that she simply *must* be psychotic. (Occasionally, however, she'll

throw a temper tantrum. Then look out.) The thrill of *The Bad Seed* lies both in its staunch refusal to make this little girl adorable, and its ability to make audiences downright giddy whenever she acts out some new atrocity – we enjoy being Rhoda’s co-conspirators, and simultaneously ache to wring the girl’s neck.

Yet while the play’s more overtly comedic bits remain intact, Richmond Hill’s production treats most of Anderson’s material with unwarranted solemnity. Whether it was the fault of pacing or slow line pick-ups, Thursday night’s performance was too often halting and downbeat, and the play’s psychological gobbledygook was handled with hallowed seriousness; we’re meant to empathize with Christine, certainly, but we’re also meant to *enjoy* Rhoda’s monstrosity, and here, so much dramatic emphasis was placed on Christine’s misery that I felt nearly *guilty* for wanting more nastiness from the show.

A few of the cast members make vivid impressions. Yet despite connecting with one another nicely, their interpretations of the material are so wildly diverse that the actors could be performing in completely different shows; depending on which character is holding our attention, *The Bad Seed* is a comedy – oftentimes an incredibly *broad* comedy – or a tragedy or a thriller, but rarely, as the material demands, a combination of the three.

I really like Melissa Scott as an actress; she’s focused and believable, and appears to be truly *feeling* the lines she delivers. Scott grounds *The Bad Seed* in reality, and her go-for-broke emotional sequences deliver the goods; Christine’s reunion with her father (a sweetly guarded Cal Taylor), especially, is a heartbreaker. But she never quite suggests the florid depths of madness Christine must inevitably sink to – which, considering Anderson’s hysterical conception of her character, may just be a sign of the actress’ mental well-being – and, in all honesty, Scott seems a bit too *sane* for this ensemble. Despite the performer’s skill, her lovely, naturalistic readings don’t quite gel with the others’ more presentational, ’50s-era portrayals.

As the fledgling psychoanalyst Monica, Diane Greenwood, with her stylized over-enunciation, pops her eyes and makes insane declarations as if they were the most rational statements in the world, and as the grieving, soused mother of Rhoda’s deceased “friend,” Stacy McKean sloshes about the stage with woozy hysteria and breaks up her sentences in unexpected ways; both performers add comic texture, and are big hits with the audience. (On opening night, McKean’s first exit even elicited applause.) Yet the performances, enjoyable though they are, don’t make much contextual sense. McKean’s drunken stumblings are *too* comedic for the role – her character doesn’t seem much fazed by her son’s murder – and Greenwood’s flightiness just makes Monica seem bizarre to the point of distraction.

There’s one performance here that’s pitched almost exactly right, and – wouldn’t you know it? – it comes from a 10-year-old. (And a little child shall lead them, indeed.) Hannah Waller appears to be having amazing fun on the Richmond Hill stage – her blasé acceptance of Rhoda’s viciousness is deeply funny and just creepy enough, and she’s more than a match for the show’s adults. Waller alone seems to realize that when audiences attend a production of *The Bad Seed*, we *love* hissing at this devious little girl, and the young actress, with her frighteningly mature stare and ability to change emotions on a dime, appears more than happy to let us. At one point in the production, Monica asks, regarding Rhoda, “Isn’t she perfection?” and all I could think was, “Yup. Pretty damned close.