

Cheery "Tomatoes"

River Cities' Reader – August 16, 2006 - by Mike Schulz

Last August, in writing about the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's production of *Over the Tavern*, I prefaced my review by mentioning the conversation I had with the couple sitting next to me; none of us had previously heard of the Tom Dudzick comedy we were about to see, and were looking forward to the surprise.

One year later, as luck would have it, I found myself seated beside the very same couple for another Richmond Hill presentation unfamiliar to us - John Patrick's *A Bad Year for Tomatoes*, directed by Joseph R. DePauw - and I'm thinking that my accidental theatre-going companions are some kind of good-luck charm. For while Patrick's comedy is nowhere near as strong as *Over the Tavern*, it, too, is a fine surprise, a silly piece of fluff made enjoyable by its delightfully nutty cast. *Tomatoes* itself is only borderline funny, but luckily for Patrick - and for the Richmond Hill audience - DePauw's actors elicit more laughs from the material than they should be expected to.

Tomatoes' setup, at least, is goofily amusing. Hollywood performer Myra Marlowe (Diane Greenwood), looking for a quiet place to write her autobiography, rents out a tiny home in New England. Constant visits by badgering neighbors and local eccentrics, however, make concentration impossible - oddly, despite being labeled "the best actress in the business" by her agent Tom (Kevin Brake), none of the townsfolk knows who Myra is - so the actress devises a character to ward them off: a Baby Jane-like twin sister, locked in the next room, who is prone to cutting off visitors' ears with scissors. (This ruse is handily accomplished with a tape recorder and, when the situation demands a *physical* presence, a blond fright wig and screechy hayseed accent.) Need I tell you that complications ensue?

Obviously, we're not meant to *believe* any of this, but *Tomatoes* has a perfectly acceptable farcical structure. I just wish the playwright had a better ear for dialogue. For long stretches, Patrick seems to have studied at the Neil Simon School for Snappy Banter, where every clever utterance is followed by an even-*more*-clever comeback, and this wouldn't be so egregious if the jokes were actually *funny*. Yet the punchlines are obvious and you could set your watch to the percussive beats of the dialogue; the cheeky relentlessness of *Tomatoes*' repartee, especially between Myra and Tom, grows tiresome. (At one point during the first of several interminable conversations, the actress says to her agent, "Stop being a wit," and I thought: Yes, *please*.)

But while Patrick may not have much talent for crafty repartee, he appears skillful at character comedy, especially in the personages of Myra's annoying drop-ins. Two of them, a pair of Christian gossips played by Eugenia Giebel and Jan Andersen, have a terrific bit in which they argue about whether a local ne'er-do-well had intimate relations with a chicken or a turkey, and Giebel's busybody trumps her companion with, "I was at the *trial*." And David Bailey portrays a backwoods half-wit who asks Myra what she does for a living, and responds to her being a writer with, "Horseback?" The neighbors' dialogue is amusing, but better still, it's *human*, and the actors in these roles are just loopy enough to make their comedic stereotypes fly.

Giebel makes for an absolutely endearing hypocrite, and is especially good when snapping at her secretly boozy best friend, played by Andersen as an adorably willing lush. Susan Perrin-Sallak, as an amateur psychic, has a thrilling low voice and intimidating presence; charging across the stage in flowing caftans and delivering zingers with a withering glare, she's like Bea Arthur's Maude, and would get similar laughs if Patrick gave her funnier things to say. (As she proved in Playcrafters' *Enchanted April* last summer, Perrin-Sallak is a sensational deadpan comic.)

And Bailey, despite being saddled with a terrible fake beard - a *cardboard* beard would have looked more convincing - is really something. He inflects his lines as if the very act of speaking were an incredible imposition, and displays a genuine, unexpected sweetness; the biggest laugh in the show comes when Myra's "sister" rushes out to him, scissors aloft, and he greets her with a disarmingly genial, "Hi!"

As for Greenwood, she's the show's linchpin, and it's hard to imagine it working half so well with another performer in the lead. As an actress, Greenwood is stylized but she isn't phony; she means every daffy word that comes out of her mouth. She's also smart enough not to take Patrick's material all that seriously - her Myra is annoyed without ever being a killjoy - and Greenwood looks like she's having the time of her life; when Myra does a happy little dance while preparing her scheme, or when she beams with pride when Bailey's hick compliments the rear end of her "sister," Greenwood's performance joy is infectious.

It certainly seemed to be for Friday's Richmond Hill audience, who rose to give *A Bad Year for Tomatoes* a standing ovation, and for the couple I was seated with, who laughed delightedly and laughed often. We made plans to meet up again for Richmond Hill's production *next* August. Expect me to enjoy that one, too.

Richmond Hills finds '06 a good year for `Tomatoes'

Dispatch / Argus – October 13, 2006 - by Julie Jensen

So it's "A Bad Year for Tomatoes"? No problem. You won't need them for pitching at the Richmond Hill Players, now presenting a play of that title, because they're doing a fine job.

Director Joseph DePauw manages to thread together the components of this peculiar comedy well enough to keep the audience amused from start to finish.

Diane Greenwood, whose mobile, expressive face always lights up the stage, plays Myra Marlowe, an actress who tries to retire to a small New England village to write the story of her life. Once more she becomes Myrtle Gurdle, and more drama awaits her than she realizes.

Kevin Brake is Tom Lamont, her agent, who is trying to coax her back to the West Coast. He plays the role with assurance.

Neighbors who live too close for comfort include Cora Gump, played by Jan Andersen. She throws back booze glass after glass. Another is Reba Harper, played by Eugenia Giebel as a self-righteous bearer of pies and just a hint of gossip.

Then there's Piney, who sells wood, manure, nuts, you name it -- and always for a low price with an add-on for the containers. David Bailey portrays him as a literalist with some strange tastes. He cracks nuts with his teeth and a rocking chair.

Susan Perrin-Sallak is Willa Mae Wilcox, the seeress in exotic garb who enters through the bottom half of the door. She hates anyone who is a Pisces.

Bill Giebel is the sheriff, whom the neighbors call to Myrtle's house when things really get hairy.

Myrtle's method of writing her book is talking to herself on a recording device. She finds another use for this when there's no let-up in knocking and doorbell-ringing.

When Cora Gump weeps copiously and says her husband hit her in the mouth, and she wants to stay with Myrtle for a while, Myrtle knows she has to do something.

She invents a mad sister, Sadie, who wields a wicked pair of scissors, and even goes so far as to portray her, wearing a blonde wig from her acting days. Of course, Piney falls for her -- "She's purty." However, she's just a recorded voice most of the time.

The tomatoes of the title show up in a scene where Myrtle proudly shows off a tiny green sphere, saying it cost her \$18 to grow it.

Every time somebody says "You can say that again!" the speaker takes it as an order and says it again, which is fairly funny.

In the end, Myrtle is Myra again, moving toward a future far from a New England village. The role her agent now suggests for her is quite personal.

Willie plays the doctor, and he tells the patient, "You are going to have trouble with your stomach. You just swallowed my stick."

The sexy nurse leans over to check a patient record, and Willie looks up her short skirt lasciviously.

Al, dressed in a shrieking plaid suit, comes in as a tax collector. Willie's diagnosis of him is, "You know what you've got? A filthy undershirt."

In the end, both of them are headed for a home for former actors in New Jersey, where they can trade one-liners for the rest of their lives.

Mother, son toiling in Richmond Hill's garden

Dispatch / Argus – August 18, 2006 - by Claudia Loucks

GENESE0 -- The current Richmond Hill production of 'A Bad Year for Tomatoes' is a 'family affair' for Eugenia Giebel and her son Bill Giebel, both of Geneseo.

The two are cast in the comedy, directed by Joe DePauw, Geneseo, who encouraged both Mrs. Giebel and her son to try theater. Mrs. Giebel is cast as a nosey, gossipy neighbor and Mr. Giebel is the sheriff of Beaver Haven, Conn.

'I actually have to address him in the play,' Mrs. Giebel said. 'And he really looks like a sheriff who is tired of this old biddy bothering him about nothing.'

'A Bad Year for Tomatoes' marks the 14th production for Mrs. Giebel, and the fourth show for her son.

Mrs. Giebel graduated from Moline High School, Black Hawk College and Western Illinois University, Macomb. She said she always wanted to be in plays while in high school, 'but didn't have the nerve to try it.'

'On my first visit to a Richmond Hill Players production in 1988 ('Prisoner on Second Avenue'), I told my best friend, and stepdaughter Michaela Moore, that I wanted to do that, be on stage,' she said. 'She said she could see me doing that.'

Mrs. Giebel learned more about the theater from Mr. DePauw. When auditions were announced in 1990, Mrs. Giebel tried out. Bill accompanied her to those auditions.

'I told Bill that I was going to audition for other plays as long as I was there,' she said. 'The worst that could happen would be that I would not get any part.'

But that didn't happen. She was cast in 'Middle of the Night,' beginning a long association with the theater.

Mr. Giebel and his mother have been cast together in two previous Richmond Hill productions, 'Witness for the Prosecution' in 1991 and 'Let It Rain' in 1994, but according to Mr. Giebel, 'A Bad Year for Tomatoes' is different from the others.

'I actually have some lines this time, not many, but there are lines,' he said.

Mr. Giebel also played Chief Bromden in 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest' in 2000.

He recalled the director, Jalayne Riewerts, asked his mother to have him audition for her.

'So I did, reluctantly,' he said. 'But I'm glad I did. I was Chief Bromden and that is probably my most memorable experience. A lot of my lines were recorded so I just had to sit there and pretend I was deaf and dumb. That's harder than you may think.'

'(Theater) challenges me to get in front people because I'm not really a people person,' Mr. Giebel said.

Mr. Giebel is employed at the Geneseo Community Center as a custodian/maintenance man. He said he enjoys 'tinkering' with cars and hopes to someday own a Harley.

'I like to collect die cast cars (Hot Wheels),' he said. 'I also collect Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel trading cards and memorabilia and I have a pretty good collection of horror movies.'