

## **Richmond Hill Players clue in to comedic 'Cliffhanger'**

**Quad City Times – April 7, 2006 - by David Burke**

IT was the professor. In the foyer. With a bust of Socrates.

Richmond Hill Players' "Cliffhanger," which concludes its two-week run this weekend in Geneseo, Ill., can't really be called a whodunit, since the audience pretty well knows who committed the crime 20 minutes into the show.

The professor in question, Henry Lowenthal (Dave Rash), is a philosophy prof who's nearing retirement age and being pushed out the door by department chair Edith (Melissa Scott), despite his desire to earn his way into an endowed chair at the college. When she visits his house on the way to her mountain cabin, an argument ensues and he accidentally clubs her (backstage) with a small statue of the Greek.

The professor and his wife (Peggy Freeman) try to dispose of the body, while he deals with a slacker-stoner student (Chad Koker) and a former student-turned-police detective (Cal Taylor) who's investigating the crime.

The student blackmails the professor so he can get a passing grade in the class. That prompts the prof and his wife to plan on offing the student, then disposing of his body, while avoiding the third degree from the detective.

Isn't it nice to see a show where the old folks are so active?

"Cliffhanger" (couldn't there be a better name than this generic title?) is billed as a comic-thriller — it's got more laughs than a typical mystery, and more suspense to it than a usual comedy — and playwright James Yaffe swings back and forth between the two rather regularly. This isn't an "Arsenic and Old Lace" kind of murder-comedy, either, and a couple of lines between Rash and Freeman might make a few in the audience blush.

Rash, a Richmond Hill vet, is well-suited for the part. Although his line readings seem a bit wooden at times, the look of anguish on his face while contemplating his fate are dead-on. Freeman plays off him well, injecting a nice amount of spit-and-vinegar in role that could have been lost with another actress.

Scott sinks her teeth into the villainous (even wearing all black) role of the department chair and, even more noteworthy, has to play dead for 20 minutes on stage with audience members just feet away. Koker, an Adam Sandler lookalike, veers from Eddie Haskell to a potential criminal as the cycle-riding student with a few frayed wires. And Taylor is downright Columbo-esque as the detective. (Do all detectives have to wear rumpled trenchcoats, or is that just on stage and screen?)

Director Gregg Neuleib admirably directs the show, and I'd contend that job is all the more difficult doing so in the round of the Barn Theatre. Little subtle movements — Freeman's eyes rolling (only seen by one-fourth of the audience) as Scott spills her academic qualifications, for instance — may not be appreciated by all the audience, but make a show like this seem all the more realistic nonetheless.

The final few minutes of the show — where the audience discovers that not everything is what it seems to be — clouds up the picture quite a bit, but definitely puts the protagonist and the antagonist in their places.

"Cliffhanger" may not be deep theater, but it's a good fit for a community group that wants to give its audience a little suspense and a couple of laughs.

## ***Cliffhanger* at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre**

**River Cities Reader – April 5, 2005 - by Mike Schulz**

You have to give credit to a playwright who really knows his audience.

In the comedy-thriller *Cliffhanger*, currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, author James Yaffe presents us with Harry Lowenthal (David Rash), an elder philosophy professor who accidentally kills Edith (Melissa Scott), his young successor. (And by “accidentally kills,” I mean “didn’t *intend* to murder her when he bashed her on the skull with a bust of Socrates.”)

After mulling over the morality of the deed, Harry and his wife Polly (Peggy Freeman) dispose of the body, an act witnessed by Melvin (Chad Koker), one of Harry’s students. Melvin blackmails the couple – if Harry gives Melvin a passing grade, the unpleasantness will be forgotten. And when Harry warns Melvin that his actions may lead to trouble, the kid sneers at the Lowenthals, “What are *you* going to do? You’re *old* people!”

You should have heard the Barn Theatre crowd react. If they could have, they would have torn the little bastard apart *themselves*.

*Cliffhanger* is a show of a type I’ve never seen before – a comic thriller designed *specifically* for seniors. It’s like *Murder, She Wrote* if Angela Lansbury did the killing. Harry, despite his act of violence, and Polly, despite her Lady MacBeth-like leanings, are unquestionably the heroes of the tale; the victim, whom Polly calls “a bitch,” and the blackmailing punk are the villains. (The show’s fifth character – a middle-aged cop played by the ever-solid Cal Taylor – is one of the good guys, as his character rails against the idealistic ’60s generation and today’s young people “with their pockets filled with dope.”) And the play proved an utter delight to the mostly senior crowd at last Thursday’s performance, who loved watching the elder couple turn the tables on their youthful oppressors. The standing ovation that greeted *Cliffhanger*’s close started as soon as the curtain call *began*.

Admittedly, it took a while to get on Yaffe’s wavelength (identifying with murderers is a tricky business, even in a comedy), but once I did – once I realized we weren’t *supposed* to hope that Harry would pay for his crime – I was able to enjoy *Cliffhanger* for the goofy nonsense it is. Yaffe’s script is twisty without being *completely* illogical, director Gregg Neuleib stages the action well for the Barn’s theatre-in-the-round setup, and the show is blessed with two positively endearing performances.

Interestingly, however, they’re given by the actors in the *villainous* roles. When Melissa Scott arrived in the opening scene, I was delighted, because this sincere, empathetic actress appeared to be having a fantastic time playing a contemptible shrew. I was also dejected, because I knew her Edith wouldn’t be on stage (not *alive*, at any rate) nearly enough. Yaffe isn’t at all subtle about Edith’s hatefulness – at one point, he gives her a monologue about how misunderstood *Hitler* was – but in a contraption such as *Cliffhanger*, you don’t necessarily want subtlety, and Scott delivers Edith’s bilious resentment with electricity. I was sad to lose her so soon. And Koker, a laid-back riot, makes his slow-witted character fresh through great, quizzical facial expressions and perfectly delayed reaction time; he’s like a devious Jeff Spicoli.

Rash and Freeman have some amusing bits. After Harry accepts his dark side and Rash no longer has to spend so much time acting anguished, the actor delivers a few snappy one-liners, and Freeman has a priceless moment when Polly complains about all the *laundry* the crime is forcing her to do. But at that opening-night performance – and there’s no delicate way to say this – both actors’ cue pick-ups were so tardy, and the uncomfortable pauses *within* their dialogue were so glaring, that I was continually on edge, and only because I was afraid that Rash and Freeman had forgotten their lines. The on-stage action never came to a complete halt – it *threatened* to during a lengthy piece of business involving Polly serving coffee – but the actors’ discomfort was noticeable, and sadly distracting. The only thing that was being killed for much of the show’s length was the momentum, and a silly, enjoyable romp such as *Cliffhanger* needs as quick a tempo as it can muster.

## **`Cliffhanger' hangs onto the answer**

**Argus-Dispatch – April 3, 2006 - by Julie Jensen**

Who did what to whom is the question posed by 'Cliffhanger,' the current production of the Richmond Hill Players at the Barn in Geneseo, and the answers are withheld until the last scene of Act II.

Veteran actors David Rash and Peggy Freeman are Professor Harry Lowenthal and his wife, Polly, and they exhibit all the nuances of a happily-married couple.

He is on the verge of retirement and wants to delay it by appointment to an endowed chair at the college where he teaches philosophy. He has been department chair, but his successor, a former student, refuses to recommend him.

She is Edith Wilshire (Melissa Scott), a nasty bit of work who believes in situational ethics and flaunts her Phi Beta Kappa key.

The professor is so upset by her refusal to recommend him that he picks up a bust of Socrates and follows her into the hall. The sound of a blow and a shriek from offstage are heard, and Ms. Wilshire is dragged back into the living room bloody and motionless.

The professor starts to call the police, but his wife won't allow it, and now he has to wrestle with the moral and ethical implications of his act.

As the doorbell rings, they drag the 'corpse' into another room and admit a student, Melvin McMullen, played with nervous energy by Chad Koker. He has come to plead with the professor to change his failing grade, crying, carrying on and threatening suicide.

As soon as the Lowenthals get rid of him, they put Edith Wilshire in her own car, which the professor drives to her mountain cabin, where he shoves her over a cliff.

The day of the funeral, a police lieutenant, Dave DeVito, calls on the Lowenthals and says they suspect Edith Wilshire's death was a suicide.

The policeman took the professor's ethics class years before, but he refers to it as 'All of those fairy tales you are telling those kids.' He leaves, only to return immediately and say they can't find the Phi Beta Kappa key Edith always wore on a chain.

The Lowenthals search frantically and fruitlessly for it, and then the McMullen kid is back, twirling the chain and telling them he found it in Edith's car and that he saw the professor push Edith off the cliff. He won't tell if the professor will revoke his failing grade.

The kid winds up drugged, tied up, and close to a Socratic blow to the head, and what happens from then on is not predictable.

Gregg Neuleib has paced the play extremely well, and despite its gory aspects, it also garners a lot of laughs.

## **One-time schoolboy actor still going through a stage**

**Argus-Dispatch – April 6, 2006 - by Claudia Loucks**

Geneseo actor Cal Taylor's love for the stage began when he was in first grade in a one-room schoolhouse in eastern Nebraska.

"We did a Christmas show every year, and I couldn't wait until after Thanksgiving, when the stage would be set up in the back of the classroom and we would start rehearsing for the Christmas show," he said. "I was in first grade, and I can still remember playing a stowaway on Santa's sleigh who finds himself at the North Pole in one of the plays."

The acting bug continued to bite Mr. Taylor, who can be seen as Lt. David DeVito in "Cliffhanger," the current production of Geneseo's Richmond Hill Players. He was active in high-school drama

and took part in several shows. He attended the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, after serving in the U.S. Navy, but was a mechanical engineering major and took only one theater class.

In 1985, after college, Mr. Taylor moved to Herman, Neb., a small town of about 300 people. He co-founded a theater group there and served in every capacity of production until he moved away.

"My years there were very rewarding for me," Mr. Taylor said. "It demonstrates what makes a strong community -- intergenerational activities, which theater obviously is."

Every theater group he has been involved with has "warmly welcomed" him, he said. "That is really important to someone who has moved around as much as I do."

Mr. Taylor learned about Geneseo's Richmond Hill Players from reading about auditions in this newspaper. He auditioned last year and was cast in a cameo part as an IRS agent in "You Can't Take It With You."

He considers his favorite role to be Deputy File in "The Rainmaker," a part he played in 2004 with the Twin City Players in Michigan.

"When I was first cast, I was shaking my head, thinking Lizzie was cast with too old of an actress, and the romantic lead, Starbuck, really didn't fit the bill," Mr. Taylor said. "Of course, I had learned long before to trust the director's instincts, and this was no exception."

"The cast was perfect and totally unselfish, and all the characters were played with dignity."

Having had some experience at directing in Nebraska, Mr. Taylor said he would be interested in taking that role again.

"I enjoy theater because of the community involvement as well as for the warm words of praise from the audience," he said. "Actors are lying if they say anything different."

"I also enjoy the stage because there is always room to grow, something new to learn or a skill to try and perfect."