

## 'Death' is drawn-out, but quite thoughtful

Quad City Times – April 19, 2007 - by Ruby Nancy

It might not be what everyone will notice first, but “Death Takes a Holiday” — the latest production to grace the stage at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill. — was written by a man.

The female characters get to stand in place and sit, looking around prettily, and not much else. In an early scene, the assembled guests at a castle “somewhere in Europe” in 1927 are trying to cope with a series of upsetting events, so all the men have a drink to calm their nerves. As the women sit, blinking raptly, the male actors on stage all pour and down the drinks — prompting an audience member in the row behind me Saturday to say, not so terribly sotto voce, “What, the women don't get to drink?” What the women do get to do, though, is to be protected. (Later, one has enough of a fright that she is actually allowed to have some — shocking, I know — brandy.)

There is also a scene in which a man refers to his current — and ostensibly adult — love interest as “my exquisite child,” which is the kind of old-school (and, to many, offensive) parlance that almost exclusively references women as infantile. And although I am glad to see that director Tom Morrow has done what used to be called “color-blind” casting (as do many of the better directors in and around the Q-C), I could not help but notice that — when a perceived threat is named at a certain plot point — the sturdy, manly men are assigned to guard each of the young women by name, except the black one. Although the quartet of gallery commentators in my corner didn't also question (aloud, at least) the fact that no one would be protecting the more mature ladies, there were multiple versions of “What, nobody is gonna guard the black girl?”

The script is lengthy, talky and sonorous — sometimes all three at once — so this often-thoughtful, sometimes-in-need-of-editing play leaves plenty of time for musing about things like gender roles, yet it does have delightful moments. It has several that are pretty funny, too, although I must confess to being the only chuckler at least a half-dozen times during the show's three acts.

My favorite character is that of veteran actor David Rash, who plays an elderly baron coping with a renewed randiness in a host of entertaining ways. The other men and boys seek him out for advice on romance, love-making and every single aspect of wooing a woman. He answers, sometimes with more direct ribald than the other characters expect, and when this happens, the guys react in a sober shock. (If one of the female characters is on stage at the time, they just blink their blankness.) He even comes on to a mature princess with an entertaining mix of savoir faire and sheer boyish giddiness that is perfectly enchanting. What Rash achieves is a comic stealing of several vignettes, and he just gets funnier as the show progresses. Gallery: “The old boy is mackin' tonight, for sure!” “Look at him go!” “You know he's gonna get that, right?” My review: absolutely entertaining.

Jim Driscoll has the title role here, and he does (as expected) very good work, blending a kind of innocence with too much world-weary knowledge and doing so with just the right level of intensity. Jason Platt is a standout, showing us more of his character through body and jaw tension than through words — and giving us a clear view of some of the many undercurrents on view beneath the blandity.

Molly McLaughlin vamps her one-note character with all kinds of sizzle — but what a waste of the talent we know she has — and Diane Greenwood (who always gets great costumes) looks great as a duchess who has little to do except look good and blink a lot. Newcomer Tyla Cole seems to have a lot of potential, too — her scene with Driscoll has plenty of depth — but she has little to do but look worried or confused while wearing a series of questionable bridesmaid dresses.

It's a different kind of show, billed as a “romance/drama” and unique enough to warrant dramaturgy notes, but even with its strangeness and period prejudices, it has plenty to make it worth seeing. Although you won't likely get seats that come with the kind of wonderful commentary surrounding them that I had the fun of hearing last weekend, don't miss the chance to see “Death Takes a Holiday.”

## Death Becomes Him: "Death Takes a Holiday"

River Cities Reader – April 18, 2007 - by Mike Schulz

Actors frequently speak of performers who "raise the bar," whose personal performance standards are so high that they challenge - and inspire - their co-stars to match them. In *Death Takes a Holiday*, the comedy/drama/supernatural romance currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, James Driscoll raises the bar so high it's practically celestial.

This isn't to say that Driscoll is the whole show. But in portraying the physical embodiment of Death in Walter Ferris' adaptation of Alberto Casella's novel, Driscoll is so suave, comical, and marvelously insinuating that it's nearly impossible to focus on anybody else. The only reason you occasionally *do* is because, more often than not, his 10 castmates - including some truly formidable acting talent - are setting off plenty of performance fireworks of their own. If you have any interest in the art of acting, you owe it to yourself to see *Death Takes a Holiday*; director Tom Morrow's wonderful production demonstrates just what can happen when a performer truly raises the bar, and when his fellow performers aren't afraid of meeting him there.

It does take a few scenes, though, for the show to find its footing. In the sitting room of a European castle, circa 1927, we are quickly introduced to the Duke and Duchess de Catolica (Greg Kerr and Diane Greenwood), and their son, Corrado (Kevin Maynard). Corrado is in love with Grazia of San Luca (Miranda Lipes), whose mother, Marie (Jackie Skiles), enjoys the flirtations of the elder Baron Cesarea (Dave Rash). The baron is father-in-law to Alda (Molly McLaughlin), who is conducting an affair with Eric Fenton (Jason Platt), brother to Rhoda (Tyla Cole). And as all of these relationships are revealed in the play's first 15 minutes, you can be forgiven for being confused about who, exactly, everyone is. (Even by the show's end, I never quite gleaned the Fentons' relation to one another, and at different times thought they were husband and wife, or perhaps father and daughter.)

Yet the problem with *Holiday's* opening scenes isn't its onslaught of characters so much as their stage composition. Whenever five or more actors appear simultaneously, which happens frequently in the first act, Morrow is careful to position them so that audience members - no matter *where* they're seated in Richmond Hill's theatre-in-the-round - will have a fine view of at least three performers, a smart (and generous) move on the director's part.

But this staging also comes with a built-in limitation, as the actors themselves, positioned several feet away from one another, don't have much chance to interact; whenever a character speaks, the others have little to do but stare at her/him and wait for the line to end. During these expository sequences, when we could be getting a sense of the characters' relationships to one another, nothing much seems to be happening *internally*, and on Thursday night, at least, the pauses between the actors' early badinage was just tardy enough to be noticeable; the play didn't quite feel like life.

All that changed, ironically enough, with the appearance of Death.

From the moment Driscoll's character enters - deciding he needs a break from grim-reaping, and choosing the castle as his three-day vacation spot - *Death Takes a Holiday* emerges as a thoroughly entertaining, and unexpectedly thought-provoking, meditation on the hypnotic pull of death, and this is primarily due to the actor's incredible verve and unsettling charm; Driscoll feels like someone you actually *would* blindly follow into the Great Unknown. His readings have a mellifluous grace and a slightly bemused edge - Death is continually fascinated by the vagaries of human emotion - and he has the ability to make throwaway dialogue laugh-out-loud funny through sheer inflection. (Driscoll earns an enormous laugh with Death's giddy, plot-establishing remark, "I'm on a *holiday!*")

Driscoll, though, is also frequently, intimidatingly short-tempered (this is not a figure you want to upset), and his romantic encounters have a brazenly erotic pull - *Holiday's* seduction scenes are almost startlingly intimate. It's a true knockout of a performance. In Ferris' vision, Death is less a full-blooded character than a really clever conceit, but Driscoll plays the role with such exhilarating *brio* that it stands as a triumphant portrayal; the standing ovation that greeted his curtain call was richly deserved.

In fairness, that ovation could easily have been for the cast *en masse*. If you've followed their recent stage work, the greatness of some performers here comes as no surprise; Greenwood is so thoroughly in

character that she's riveting even when - as happens in the final act - nearly 30 minutes pass without her saying a word, and Platt's naturalistic intensity is, once again, a thrill to behold. (Conversing with his lover, who's become bored with their relationship, Platt's Eric Fenton says, "I'm sorry if I'm not ... *magnificent* enough," and we think, "Oh yes you are.")

Yet the entire ensemble is in stellar form. There are subtle, unaffectedly touching performances by Maynard and Skiles, and boisterous, exuberant ones by Kerr and Rash, whose irascible, pre-Viagra pronouncements continually cracked up the crowd. The ever-magnificent John VanDeWoestyne shows up as an army major haunted by death - and by *Death* - and gives his readings a hard-won authority that's truly inspiring.

And as the women who engage in verbal *pas de deux* with Death, Lipes, McLaughlin, and Cole effortlessly convince you that their characters not only find Death fascinating, but almost unbearably enticing; their curiosity, fear, and what can only be called *hunger* are palpable forces, and each performer enjoys long moments where she matches Driscoll's exquisite focus and fervor. With *Death Takes a Holiday*, Morrow and his cast have turned an engaging, amusing, thoughtful play into a veritable cornucopia of acting treats, and none tastier than its star's; Death may be something to fear, but in Driscoll's hands, it's also something to cherish.

## **For Jim Driscoll, death and taxes are all in a day's work**

**Dispatch/Argus – April 12, 2007 - by Claudia Loucks**

They say nothing is certain but death and taxes, and Jim Driscoll can relate. By night, he's cast as Death in the Richmond Hill Players' production of "Death Takes a Holiday," and by day, he works for the IRS.

"I thought it would be interesting to try for a part and somehow combine the two certainties, especially as one of the performances dates is April 15," he said.

"Death tries so hard to be like mortals while on his holiday," Mr. Driscoll said. "The greatest challenge in rehearsing the role has been to try to find a way to make the audience feel sympathy for him and his problems.

"Unfortunately, Death and the tax man share similar plights. No one is happy to see them coming, nor saddened by their departure. It makes for interesting on-stage dynamics."

Born and raised in Newport, R.I., Mr. Driscoll attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he studied international relations before being commissioned as an intelligence officer in the United States Army.

After his military service, he joined the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Hartford, Conn., and later transferred to the Internal Revenue Service, where he has worked for the last 20 years. He has lived in the Quad-Cities since 1991.

He made his stage debut in high school in the 1980's, then took a holiday from acting until 2000, when he landed a part with Playcrafters in Moline.

"I saw a newspaper blurb which mentioned an open casting call for the March 2000 show at Playcrafters, 'The Caine Mutiny Court Martial,' " he said. "I had seen the movie and read the book, and I hoped that, with my military experience, I could pass as one of the characters in the play."

He was cast as Commander Challee, the prosecuting attorney. "Since then, I've been hooked."

His first time on stage at Richmond Hill in Geneseo was September 2003, when he was cast in "Getting and Spending."

"I wanted to do that show because it was directed by Andy Davis, whom I had seen do amazing work in bringing the role of Salieri to life in Playcrafters' March 2003 production of 'Amadeus,' a play in which I also had a role."

In 2005, he returned to Richmond Hill in "Another Part of the Forest." He also has been cast in 10 shows with Playcrafters, listing his favorite as Biff Loman in "Death of a Salesman" in 2001.

He has been part of three productions with New Ground Theater, Davenport, including "Dinner With Friends" in 2002 and "The Drawer Boy" in 2005. He has done two shows with Quad City Music Guild and has a role in "Anything Goes" this August.

Mr. Driscoll said he has no interest in directing a show. "I prefer performing, but I've worked backstage, too, with props and crew.

"Directors have so much responsibility. They have to coordinate and see to every aspect of a show -- casting, lighting, sound, sets, costumes, etc. It seems to require such a breadth of knowledge and experience in so many facets that I should be daunted to even try.

"Tom Morrow, our director for 'Death Takes a Holiday,' is one of the best around.

"I enjoy acting because I like the opportunity to be someone else for a little while," he said. "It's like taking a vacation from your troubles or your worries for a few hours. Sometimes you get to be the good guy, sometimes the crook. I've been cast as a lawyer, barber, shopkeeper, architect, scoundrel, as an emperor, and now Death. The possibilities are limitless."

He said he enjoys community theater for the people. "Any given show is more likely than not to have a representational cross-section of society involved. Doctors, lawyers, students, homemakers, carpenters, ministers -- young and old, rich and poor, it seems the love of theater is unrestricted.

"The bond of cast and crew needed to bring off a successful production also is a great equalizer, he said. "The shared effort and passion which people bring into the theater make a fertile ground for the creation of long-long-lasting friendships."