

Making "Moon" Shine: "King o' the Moon," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre

River Cities Reader – June 13, 2007 – by Mike Schulz

I've seen plenty of stage sitcoms over the years, but based on *Over the Tavern* and its sequel, *King o' the Moon* - currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre - Tom Dudzick appears to be that rare stage-sitcom creator with *soul*.

When you watch a piece by Neil Simon or Ken Ludwig or the late Larry Shue, you can enjoy the zany/cute setups and relentless punchlines but you don't necessarily *feel* anything. (Personally, I find even these authors' most acclaimed works pretty hollow.) And Dudzick does share their fondness for easily recognizable characters, conveniently resolvable stage complications, and a cannily placed wisecrack.

Yet his works are lighter, more off-handedly funny, and more honestly poignant than those of his more famous predecessors. I oftentimes laughed my head off at director Susan Simosky's *King o' the Moon* - which I caught at a preview performance last Wednesday - and when I did, it was deeply affectionate laughter, the sound you make when a beloved family member does something so wonderfully, atypically silly that it startles you into giggling. When I *wasn't* laughing out loud, it was because I was busy smiling. Such is the effect of the production as a whole.

If you were fortunate enough to catch Richmond Hill's production of *Over the Tavern* in 2005 - which Simosky also directed - you'll instantly recall *King o' the Moon's* clan of squabbling, proud Polish-Catholics, the Pazinskis. The year is 1969, a decade after the events detailed in *Tavern*, and with the exception of grouchy patriarch Chet (five years dead when *Moon* opens), the principals are the same: ever-harried mother Ellen (Angela Rathman, revisiting her 2005 role), now romantically attached to Chet's best friend, Walter (Bill Hudson); eldest son Eddie (Chris White), newly wed to the pregnant Maureen (Jessica Niccol) and heading, none too enthusiastically, to Vietnam; mentally challenged younger son Georgie (Matt Gerard), still happily entertaining himself at home; daughter Annie (Ryan Mosher-Ohr), bitterly sarcastic and stuck in a loveless marriage; and youngest son Rudy (Ryan Anderson), whose stand-up-comic aspirations have only *slightly* abated since - in a deathbed promise to his father - he agreed to join the seminary and become a priest.

But if you're planning to see the show but missed out on *Over the Tavern*, don't sweat it, because story-wise, nothing that happens in *King o' the Moon* is all that surprising. Being a stage sitcom, arguments will be had, hearts will be broken, Life Lessons will be learned, and everything will invariably turn out for the best. (Thankfully, we don't attend a theatre piece of this sort for ingenuity; we *want* familiarity, and if the production happens to be ingenious, too, so much the better.)

Yet Dudzick, to his great credit, appears less concerned about story than about texture and tone in *King o' the Moon*; the show is charming and hilarious not because of what its characters do, but who they *are*. The playwright has a rather extraordinary gift for throwaway dialogue that's funny about three beats *after* it's delivered - you're so caught up in the family dynamics that you're not expecting punchlines. The jokes, as they are in most families, are simply baked into daily conversation.

And Dudzick's unapologetic sincerity, especially in such a traditionally synthetic stage genre, is unexpected in the best possible sense; conversations that could - and *should* - be unbearably treacly are handled with refreshing dignity *and* a sharp sense of humor. (Rudy routinely, gently tweaks the family's Catholicism: After a reference about Jesus being a carpenter, the youngest Pazinski, in mock wonder, says, "Just think ... if Jesus ever stepped on a rusty nail, he could have cured his own lockjaw.")

It would be easy to say that Matt Gerard walks off with the production - he gives a continually imaginative and almost absurdly sweet performance, as thoroughly detailed as Leonardo DiCaprio's in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* - but that wouldn't suggest how *selfless* his portrayal is. In a role that could easily lend itself to showboating, Gerard never steals focus. Not that, considering this ensemble, that would be *easy*.

Rathman's honesty and natural authority are invigorating; together with Simosky, the actress keeps *Over the Tavern's* spirit alive for us. Watching the tentative romance blossom between Ellen and Hudson's terrifically appealing Walter is a continual delight, and Niccol, after her dramatic triumph in last summer's *Proof*, reaffirms that she's also a sprightly, inventive comedienne.

White, with his ferocious comedic urgency that can turn tragic in a flash, is beautifully matched against Anderson's good-natured, affectlessly relaxed Rudy; their antagonistic brotherhood, with its hidden reserves of emotion, feels absolutely real. And I couldn't have been happier about seeing Ryan Mosher-Ohr, MIA from the area theatre scene since her splendidly daffy performance in Richmond Hill's *You Can't Take It With You* in

2005. Blessed with a voice that adds a delicious comedic curlicue to her every line reading (she's like a Jennifer Tilly whom you *don't* want to smack), Mosher-Ohr is so ceaselessly in character - and, in her dramatic moments, so effortlessly moving - that you find yourself missing her whenever she's not around.

These seven play off one another as though they'd been doing it all their lives, and Simosky deserves credit not just for the performers' thrillingly unforced interpretations, but for her attention to silence and nuance and the impact of a perfect physical gesture. *King o' the Moon's* loveliest recurring bit finds the characters routinely taking the time to recognize Georgie - who's on stage constantly yet nearly always tangential to the action - by tussling his hair or diverting him with Paddle Ball. Even when the script ignores Georgie, Simosky makes sure her actors *never* do.

Working from Dudzick's beauty of a script, Simosky hasn't just created a topnotch stage sitcom with *King o' the Moon*; she and her supremely talented performing ensemble have created an utterly believable family. After two-plus hours spent in their company, it's a family that you may not be ready to say goodbye to.

`King o' the Moon' commands your attention

Dispatch/Argus – June 15, 2007 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "King o' the Moon" is an energetic performance by a well-synchronized cast.

Director Susan Simosky has done an excellent job of combining the domestic hassles of a Polish-American family with the cosmic ramifications of the 1969 moon landing.

The set is the Pazinski family's backyard, with picnic table, lawn chairs, and a treehouse up and offstage. It's the setting for some fairly violent action.

This show is a sequel to "Over the Tavern," performed in 2005 (also directed by Susan Simosky), and Angela Rathman returns as Ellen Pazinski, the mother. However, the father has died, and the children are all adults (with the exception of the developmentally handicapped Georgie), so it's no stretch to have them portrayed by other actors.

Ms. Rathman brings her usual verve to the role and still has a strong grip on her grown-up children. She realistically portrays a widow falling in love.

Georgie, who in "Over the Tavern" loved to say "the S word," is played by Matt Gerard. His body language and speech are extremely funny and quite understandable to the audience. He's the one who coins the play's title, "King o' the Moon."

Ryan Anderson is Rudy Pazinski, the son who comes home from seminary to minister to his siblings despite his disillusionment with his religious training. A 2007 high-school graduate, he manages nuances that seem beyond his years. He also takes one heck of a fall onstage and seems none the worse for it.

Chris White is Eddie, the brother who is going off to fight for his country in Vietnam. He's tough, and yet he shows a great depth of emotion. He's the husband of Maureen, played by Jessica Nicol, who is pregnant with his child.

Ryan Mosher-Ohr is Annie, the sister unhappily married to a man who is obsessed with toy trains. Living at home now, she works herself into frenzies that are admirably expressed. Her slapping and hair-pulling scene with Maureen looks like the real thing.

Bill Hudson is Walter Fronzak, who works in the tavern Ellen has run since her husband's death. She rejects his advances at first, but he persists with great honesty and passion.

During all this emotional hoo-rah, the family is getting ready for the father's memorial dinner. When Georgie is asked, "What do you remember about Daddy?," he acts out a fit of temper and a number of carnival rides. He also climbs the ladder to the treehouse, beats his chest and yells, "King of the backyard!"

Woven into all this family stuff are the television reports of the Apollo 11 landing on the moon.

The action requires one's full attention. Sometimes it's poignant and sometimes it's amusing, but it's never dull.

Family ties strong in Richmond Hill's 'King'

Quad City Times – June 14, 2007 - by Katie Vaughn

There's a funny scene toward the end of "King o' the Moon," the latest production by the Richmond Hill Players. Family tensions erupt into humorous moments of clarity as siblings piece together an event involving a crucifix, an above-the-garage bedroom, some decidedly non-church-like behavior and — perhaps worst of all — their mother.

It's a cathartic release for the characters as well as audience members who have witnessed missed opportunities to connect, violent sibling rivalries and other interactions within a family that shouts — rather than talks — to one another.

"King o' the Moon" is part two in Tom Dudzick's trilogy about the Pazinski family. It follows "Over the Tavern," which the Richmond Hill Players offered in 2005. That first play centered on 12-year-old Rudy Pazinski and his resistance to being confirmed in the Catholic Church.

"King" finds the family a decade later, in 1969. Rudy (played by Ryan Anderson) is in seminary school, the result of a promise he made to his dying father, and trying to convince himself he fits in there.

Rudy's brother, Eddie, is about to leave a pregnant wife for Vietnam, and their sister is desperate to divorce her husband. Meanwhile, their mother, Ellen, cares for their younger brother, mentally challenged Georgie, but has found romance with her late husband's best friend.

Audiences need not have seen "Over the Tavern" to understand the second Pazinski family installment. "King o' the Moon" stands on its own as a complete story.

And that story is rooted firmly in the '60s. JFK has already been shot, and the Pazinskis learn of friends who have been killed in Vietnam. The play is set in the days surrounding Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon.

But more interesting than historical references are the ways the characters react to the times in which they live and to one another. This duality is reflected in the production's simple set of a picnic table and a treehouse: Action outside the Pazinski backyard is referred to, but what matters most takes place within the small space.

Annie (Ryan Mosher-Ohr) and Eddie (Chris White) seek out Rudy's approval on divorce and war, but resent and question his allegiance to the church when he gives his opinions. And their mother, while missing their father, looks optimistically at the prospect of life without a husband or anyone to answer to.

The questions the play raises — Is killing a man forgivable if it's during war? Does a person deserve a second chance, even if that means ending a marriage? Can you believe in heaven but not hell? — are poignant.

Yet it's the rare moments of acceptance among the characters that propel the story forward. That they happen so infrequently and imperfectly helps the small cast of actors ring true as a family.

Love of the stage leads actor to love of her life

Dispatch/Argus - June 8, 2007 - by Claudia Loucks

GENESECO -- Richmond Hill's Barn Theater has special meaning to Ryan Mosher-Ohr. She met the man who later became her husband during her first experience with the Richmond Hill Players. That was in 2002 when she was cast as Suzanne in "Picasso at the Lapin Agile."

Mrs. Mosher-Ohr plays Annie in the current Richmond Hill Players production of "King o' the Moon." The comedy/drama is her fourth show with the Richmond Hill Players. In addition to "Picasso at the Lapin Agile," and "King o' the Moon," she was on stage in "Steel Magnolias" in October of 2004 and in "You Can't Take it With You" in June of 2005.

Her debut with the Richmond Hill Players was when she met her husband, Kenneth Ohr. It was Angela Rathman, who plays Mrs. Mosher-Ohr's mother in the current play, who encouraged her to first try out for a part with the Geneseo theater group.

"He (Kenneth Ohr) played Picasso and I played his love interest, Suzanne," she said. "We didn't hit it off right away, as a matter of fact, my husband loves to tell everyone how the first time he saw the cast list he thought there was either a typo or that a guy was playing Suzanne (Ryan).

"As practices continued, we started to subtly flirt with each other. If you asked either of us, we would say it was simply to build chemistry for on-stage purposes. But secretly we were drawn to each other."

Before they were husband and wife, the couple both had parts in "Amadeus" at The Barn, and that show has special meaning for both of them.

"It was like a fairy tale," Mrs. Mosher-Ohr said. "We were all taking our bows when the lead of the show walked over to me, took my hand and led me to Ken, who was standing center stage. The lights and music changed and suddenly he was down on one knee. He said, 'whether you have 0 lines, 100 lines, or 1,000 lines, you will always be the star of my heart. Will you marry me?' We got a standing ovation."

A love for the theater has taken Mrs. Mosher-Ohr to the stages of many area community theaters, including Countryside Theater. When she was three years old Mrs. Mosher-Ohr's love for the stage began. She said she had a severe speech delay as a child and her mother was the only person who could understand what she was saying. "My mother said I used to act things out like charades to get people to understand me," she said.

She began dance lessons when she was three years old, and that was the beginning of her love for the stage. She was nine years old when she was in her first show with Music Guild, "Mame."

"I remember having to lie about my age because they didn't want anyone under 10," she said. "It was a great experience."

She sees the theater as "the chance to take the audience on a journey through a different world. If the audience laughs, cries or is moved by what they see, then I have done my job as an actor. That is what is satisfying about acting, the ability to entertain."

She said she also "loves" to act because it is an opportunity to step out of her everyday life, "and into someone else's shoes. I take something with me from every character I play and I know I am a better person because of them."