

The Western Unscripted

Impro Theatre at Falcon Theatre

Reviewed by Dink O'Neal



Floyd VanBuskirk and Robert Covarubias

Photo by Rebecca Asher

Ah, the creative days of childhood. Backyard forts, instantaneously assigned roles, and an endless supply of “You go there” and “Then I’ll say this” led to countless hours of fun. Capitalizing on this nostalgic view of yesteryear, Impro Theatre’s revolving troupe of improvisational wizards takes its audiences on a trek through the old West. Playing out on scenic designer Sandra Burns’s dusty town boardwalk with a distant plateau-laden backdrop providing visual perspective, each show’s storyline unfolds based solely on a pair of audience-spawned suggestions.

On the night reviewed, a gold pocket watch engraved with the name Bessie and the preshow occasion of a bank robbery had the company off and running. By the time the proverbial final curtain touched the stage, there were fistfights, chases on imaginary horseback, and even the obligatory slow-motion shootout.

Although this effort didn’t fall under the category of “knee-slapper,” there were plenty of laughs to go around as the totally unscripted, two-act storyline unfolded. Perhaps the greatest accolade

Happy Days

Theatre @ Boston Court

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder



Tony Shalhoub and Brooke Adams

Photo by Ed Krieger

Although this Samuel Beckett play was written and first performed more than a half-century ago, it seems he was something of a Nostradamus while churning out his hilariously bitter, deliciously off-centered allegories chronicling the hidden underbelly of life as he knew it. With our planet today crashing to destruction through climate change, not to mention our state’s bleak drought conditions and even the current debilitating heat wave enveloping the Southland this week, the absurdist playwright’s 1961 play *Happy Days* eerily reinforces his chillingly prophetic, humorously bleak pronouncements of the gradual disintegration of all living creatures struggling for fresh air and daily sustenance.

British director Peter Hall once expressed that Beckett’s much-dissected work was “as much about mime and physical precision as about words”—an observation clearly buttressing the perception that the gossamer directorial vision of Andrei Belgrader, guiding an actor as fearless as Brooke Adams, has inspired something truly remarkable. With her body stuck in a massive mound of dirt from just below her chest throughout Act One, only Adams’s arms, her incredibly mobile face, a scattering of everyday items pulled from a large leather satchel, and a few scattered groans and mumbles emanating from the mostly out-of-sight Tony Shaloub as her husband Willie are available to help her keep our attention.

When lights come up for the play’s second half, Winnie is buried even deeper, visible now only

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one could offer co-directors Dan O'Connor and Stephen Kearnin, et al., would be their attention to detail. Regardless of whether a scene or moment was spot-on or dead-ended, not once did the vernacular of their chosen genre waiver. And half the fun is watching the mental wheels turn as actors work their way around previously provided clues while searching for just the right colloquialism.

At this performance, a company of eight (from an overall cast list of 20) portrayed an array of a cattle rustlers, robber barons, boarding-house occupants, and local lawmen set in the fictional town of Comsquatch. Highlights included Floyd VanBuskirk's murderous cattle rancher hell-bent on replenishing his drought-stricken herd by eliminating his nearest rival, Elbert Grisham, played with curmudgeonly glee by O'Connor. Clearly a favorite with the audience, Grisham's premature murder proved a double-edged sword: ending the first act with the perfect cliffhanger but depriving the audience of the best-constructed character of the night. For example, while listening intently as the Comsquatch sheriff and deputy, played respectively by Ryan Smith and Daniel Blinkoff, admitted not knowing how much money was taken from the town's bank because no one kept any records, O'Connor's retort "That's a horrible way to run a bank!" nearly stopped the show.

Supporting players included Nick Massouh as a local ruffian taken under VanBuskirk's character's evil tutelage. Playing Massouh's wife was Edi Patterson who developed a romantic involvement with Blinkoff's deputy, thereby offering an interesting subplot full of conflict and drama. Kelly Holden-Bashar, who took on the moniker of Bessie, and Kari Coleman, as her sister, arrived in town, having traveled from Philadelphia. Domestically inclined, one cooked and one sewed, and they set up residence in the boarding house run by Patterson's hilarious landlord, Chesapeake Nightsong.

Assisted ably by the technical improvisation of stage manager Michael Becker on lights and Alex Caan on the soundboard, the evening flows seamlessly from scene to scene. In the end, storylines are tied up, the villains are vanquished, and young love flourishes as the sun sets in the west and once again all is well with the world.

September 16, 2014

from the neck up. Adams still uncannily manages to hold the stage despite her character's restricted physicality ("What a curse, mobility!" Winnie exclaims without much conviction), riveting our attention with her deep, soulful eyes that easily impart an acute sense of the mournfully lonely and exaggeratedly barren spaces surrounding Winnie's steadily shrinking world. As though simultaneously channeling the unique qualities of Meryl Streep or Kathleen Chalfant and Marcel Marceau, Adams magically employs the flash of a wide goofy smile or the flickering of a quickly extinguished dark cloud of fear to interrupt her character's frequent exclamations while trying to convince us—and herself—just how happy her days really are.

Willie is there to help but not able to do much himself. "You're not the crawler you once were, dear," Winnie notes, yet life without him is the scariest thing she might have to endure. "If you were to die or go away and leave me," she realizes, "what would I do? What could I do all day long? Simply gaze before me with compressed lips?" Shaloub is obviously a world-class comedian, bringing a floppy clown-like energy to the usually thankless role, pulling focus once in a while but never at an inopportune moment, always working in deference to the overdue rediscovery of his real-life wife's unearthly and too-long-absent talent.

Between the ringing of a headache-inducing bell to guide her daily habits, one shrill bleat for sleep and another to awaken, Winnie exists without a clue why she and Willie are there. "But that is what I find so wonderful," she tells us. "The way man adapts himself to changing conditions." Winnie always looks at the bright side of her dilemma, chronicling the "great mercies" of her situation in a bizarrely poetic, bitingly funny, and incredibly pessimistic two-act monologue, continuously searching for things to reinforce how wonderful life is.

Interpreted by lesser talents than this director and his two exceptionally gifted performers, nothing can be harder to sit through than *Happy Days*—something that thrilled its author, who was famous for sitting near the rear exit of his plays in performance to gleefully thank the patrons who chose to leave early. See, his work—especially this play and his classic *Waiting for Godot*—skewers the dryness and encroaching disintegration of daily life. Winnie tries desperately to keep this negativity inside her, but notwithstanding continuous little expressions of small joyful discoveries, "sorrow keeps breaking in." Despite his once-grateful personal thank-yous offered to disgusted or confused departing audience members rushing for the exit, Beckett does not let us leave the theater feeling good about the world around us, but his woeful, often uproarious revelations oddly celebrate the indomitable spirit of the human condition despite the massively insurmountable odds stacked against us all.

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Undateable

Second City

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



Amanda Blake Davis and Robyn Norris

Sometimes theater is about humankind's greatest achievers. Sometimes it's about supremely tragic figures. And sometimes, as with this show, it's about the rest of us.

A group of Second City's fine performers went off piste and conducted a social experiment. After Robyn's (Robyn Norris) friend posted a profile on a dating site and asked Robyn to check it over, Robyn set up an account to access the site. Robyn created the outlandish profile of an admittedly "crazy-insane person" she named TracyLovesCats. A shockingly large number of men—and women—responded, begging for various forms of contact with "Tracy."

Norris's fellow troupe members

Sept. 5-Oct. 5. 4252 Riverside Dr., Burbank. Wed-Sat 8pm, Sun 4pm. \$29-44. (818) 955-8101.

www.FalconTheatre.com

[Map](#)

Roar

Rockwell Table and Stage

Reviewed by Bob Verini



Matt Magnusson, Nicci Claspell, Kyra Selman, and Bianca Gisselle
Photo by Aimee Curameng

It's been 43 years since Helen Reddy rocked the charts with her announcement "I am woman, hear me roar," the foremost pop anthem echoing the feminist revolution of the 1970s. Divas have continued to warble messages of female empowerment—in numbers too big to ignore—well into this century, and many of them have been collated into the Rockwell Stage's "semi-musical" play titled, of all things, *Roar*.

That of course is a reflection of the tune "recorded by Taylor Swift," but Helen Reddy would be pleased nevertheless. If you have trouble telling your Katys and Demis from your Mileys and Gagas, or if you simply crave a wallow in today's patented brand of tuneful girl power, this turbocharged performance would be a great way to get to know them better, know/Them better, know/Them better now. (Thanks again, Taylor.)

Calling *Roar* a "semi" musical is generous, given the flimsiness of director VP Boyle's storyline linking the 25 songs. Quarreling marrieds (Matt Magnusson and Nicci Claspell), a Lesbian pair (Emily Morris and Kyra Selman), and an off-and-on threesome (Sebastian La Cause, Bianca Gisselle, and Briana Cuoco) use the pop hits to express their momentary pain or joy, as they meet in encounters marked by smoldering looks and anguished poses.

One person's health crisis and

September 16, 2014

Sept. 13-Oct. 12. 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena. Thu-Sat 8pm, Sun 2pm. \$34, discounts available. (626) 683-6883.

www.BostonCourt.org

[Map](#)

Animals Out of Paper

East West Players at David Henry Hwang Theater at Union Center of the Arts

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



Kapil Talwalkar, CS Lee, and Tess Lina
Photo by Michael Lamont

Rajiv Joseph has built *Animals Out of Paper* with metaphors about human longing for connection. The result is a gentle but unpersuasive play.

Ilana (Tess Lina) is an unhappy woman, in the process of divorcing. She is a noted expert in origami: the Japanese art of paper-folding, in which a two-dimensional sheet is transformed into a three-dimensional figure. She lives in disarray and faces a creative block. Presumably, through the action of the play, she will transform into a three-dimensional person.

One rainy night, Andy (C.S. Lee) arrives in her life. He has been longing for her from afar for years—since he first saw her lecturing at a national conference on origami. He purports to contact her on conference business, but he wouldn't mind a romance with her. He also wants her to mentor his high-school student, Suresh (Kapil Talwalkar).

The embittered Ilana lets Andy into her life, though it's not clear why—other than for Joseph's dramaturgical needs. Andy always looks on the bright side, having literally counted his blessings since he was 12 years old.

Ilana lets Suresh in, too. He's of Indian heritage, but he masquerades as a hip-hopper. He comes off the rails near the play's end, looking for a sexual connection with her. Her reaction is troubling but unfortunately not impossible. The

Chris Alvarado, Rob Belushi, Amanda Blake Davis, Kate Duffy, and Bob Ladewig joined in, posting outrageous profiles no one could possibly think were anything other than a joke. These performers' "sketch" show, *Undateable*, re-enacts verbatim the heartfelt responses by real, everyday people to these perverse personals.

So, even though Rob (Belushi) pushed the intimacy-phobic envelope with DoorSlamEric, women think Eric is dateable. And although PioneerInABox (Kate Duffy) gets busted (she claims to function as if in the 1860s, yet she's online), she manages to lure interest. Even Amanda's (Blake Davis) age-questionable Old4U75 appeals to a prospective beau.

The show, a fascinating concept, is well-structured and is imaginatively directed by Frank Caeti. It is also, of course, hilarious, though a strong strain of sympathy runs through it. And even though the show has been running for months, the performers have fresh energy. These performers are more interested in telling their story than in "being funny," so the laughs come from the audience's self-recognition and not from any obnoxious stage-hogging shenanigans.

The troupe sings and dances—and not badly—to enhance several of their "scientific" points about romantic behavior. A few minutes of improv at the end of the show reflect the performers' well-honed chops.

Locational cautions: The venue is in Hollywood where street parking has a two-hour limit, metered until midnight on Fridays. The show is a mere one hour, but it undoubtedly will start a few minutes late. In addition, the theater is upstairs, and the site has no elevator. But if you're swift and spry, head on up there for a dose of reality. It will probably provide you with more than several hearty belly laughs. It might also make you weep for mankind.

August 19, 2013

6560 Hollywood Blvd. Fri 9pm.
\$10.

www.secondcityhollywoodshows.c

goo.gl/maps/kGBj

another's drinking problem lead to some sort of vague closure, and next to *Roar*, *Mamma Mia!*'s storyline starts to look as complex as *Les Misérables*. However, few will notice or care about the thin, fuzzy, narrative, as the Rockwell cast of seven bursts roaring out of its cage to throw itself into the cavalcade of angst-y celebration with committed abandon.

As performed with the sizzling accompaniment of musical director Brian P. Kennedy's combo, most of the numbers reveal melodic sophistication and lyrical eloquence you may not have noticed on Sirius-XM as you've been driving along to them. (Kudos to Robert Bradley's sound design for keeping the words intelligible over the din.) A trio of Demi Lovato's—"Really Don't Care," "Heart Attack," and "Skyscraper"—suggests she might have a stage musical or two in her, so closely tied are the songs to specific psychology. Sara Bareilles's "Brave" becomes a plea for a vulnerable character to take control of her health when Lorde's "Royals" is used as the patient's retreat into depression and defeat.

Selman and Morris never get an opportunity to cut loose along the order of "Take Me or Leave Me" in *Rent*, but they make the most of their uninhibited moves as choreographed by Ambrose Respicio III. And speaking of *Rent*, the second act shift to heartbreak with Christine Perri's "Human" offers a comforting parallel to "Seasons of Love." Even when the situations seem derivative, the energy with which they're played seems fresh—indeed, evergreen.

September 15, 2014

Sept. 12-27. 1714 N. Vermont, Los Feliz. Fri-Sat 8pm. \$15-50. (323) 669-1550 ext. 20.

www.rockwell-la.com

[Map](#)

Equivocation

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum

Reviewed by Dany Margolies

entire story could, however, be her dream, as the play begins on a stormy night when she is awakened by Andy's persistent ringing of her doorbell.

Director Jennifer Chang stages the piece competently but seems to gloss over the deeper sadness of the characters. Lina's Ilana is just so prickly, although that may be the reason she doesn't promptly launch Suresh back on track. Lee's Andy is much the buffoon (very much akin to his character on *Dexter*). But when Ilana asks Andy about his hidden pain, Lee implodes in a beautifully internalized reaction—the most memorable moment of this production.

Naomi Kasahara's set folds and unfolds like, you guessed it, origami. Sound effects to indicate a "magical" moment distract more than aid the audience. But the scene change performed by Talwalkar's Suresh is a surprising delight.

September 15, 2014

120 Judge John Aiso St. Wed-Sat 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time 2 hours and 20 minutes, including intermission. \$28-38 plus handling per ticket; student and senior discounts available. (213) 625-7000 x20.

www.EastWestPlayers.org

[Map](#)

What I Learned in Paris

The Colony Theatre

Reviewed by Julio Martinez



Joy Brunson, Karan Kendrick, and L. Scott Caldwell

Photo by Michael Lamont

In 1973, Atlanta-based playwright Pearl Cleage served as speechwriter and press secretary to 35-year-old Maynard Jackson during his historic

Lear

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



Ellen Geer and Dane Oliver

Photo by Ian Flanders

Shakespeare's *King Lear* has its potencies. Simply described, it follows the downfall of a once-powerful leader and the dysfunction of his family. Pondering his retirement, the monarch asks his three daughters to avow their love. The elder two, Goneril and Regan, lavish empty words on papa. The youngest, Cordelia, refuses to play that game, believing her actions of loyalty and respect will trump her sisters' verbiage.

The role of Lear is also a noted goal of male actors who are, shall we say, no longer castable as Romeo. Audiences expect to see an aged Lear, whose two eldest daughters are married, who is ready to divide his kingdom among the three heirs. Age and apparent frailty aside, Lear commands the stage, the role requiring vocal and emotional range and calling for masses of memorization. Who among our great actors can fit the bill?

And, can a woman take on the role?

After more than 40 years of filling theatergoers' summer schedules with various productions of Shakespeare plays and starring in probably every leading female role in those plays, Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum artistic director Ellen Geer takes on Lear. Completing the gender swap, this Lear's three children are sons. Will the audience feel more protective of a female Lear? Do the two sons' actions now feel like elder abuse? Alas, it seems disrespect, hunger for power, and plain ol' cruelty know no gender.

It's possible audiences quite familiar with *King Lear* will find that the



Alan Blumenfeld and Ted Barton
Photo by Ian Flanders

Bill Cain's *Equivocation* posits Shakespeare in crisis. Not surprisingly, the bard behaves much as his characters do when facing their great questions. Cain's character, named Shag, cogitates: To write or not to write. That, plus sly commentary on creativity and politics, witty reflections on Shakespeare's canon, and a universal point about parental love, thoroughly fill the two-and-a-half hours of this delicious play.

Shag (Ted Barton) is in the midst of writing *King Lear* and wrestling his unruly, very true-to-life acting troupe at the Globe, under the leadership of veteran actor Richard—presumably Burbage—(Franc Ross). Character actor Nate (Alan Blumenfeld) realizes it's best to just say the lines, because he wants pay his mortgage. Incipient leading man Sharpe (Dane Oliver), however, wants to be "brilliant." Armin (Paul Turbiak) wants to keep food off the scripts. Instead, they're being asked to trudge across that rainy heath in their underwear.

That's one conflict Cain creates. Another arises as King James's henchman, aka prime minister, Robert Cecil (Blumenfeld, again) summons Shag to the palace and demands a play based on a manuscript by James. The play's plot is to be the Powder Plot—presumably real, reputedly propaganda—which we know of as Guy Fawkes's scheme to cause a massive explosion under Parliament, thereby killing the royal family and reinstalling Catholicism in England. Whether Cecil concocted the plot, or whether the government is using it to discredit Catholics, Shag must live with himself yet make a living.

Another character instigates Cain's third conflict. She is Shag's indomitable daughter, Judith (Taylor Jackson Ross), twin of his deceased and better-loved son. She, Cain proposes, is one reason Shakespeare was obsessed with twins and spent his last plays on fathers who threw away their daughters and suffered for it.

successful bid to become mayor of Atlanta—the first African American to be elected mayor of a major US city. Cleage has funneled this experience into a tame romantic sitcom, focusing on peripheral players in Jackson's campaign. Helmed by Sandra McClain with a sense of comedic expediency more than thematic clarity, The Colony Theatre's West Coast debut of *What I Learned in Paris* does not offer enough substance to warrant its two-and-a-half-hour running time, despite L. Scott Caldwell's captivating turn as feminist warrior Evie.

Played out on Charles Erven's period-perfect Atlanta apartment, the post-election night romantic shenanigans involve campaign wheeler-dealer J.P. Madison (William C. Mitchell), his youthful wife Ann (Joy Brunson), and his youthful campaign aide John Nelson (Shon Fuller). The problem lies in the fact that the two youthfuls are secretly in love, which could seriously jeopardize J.P.'s political aspirations. Observing from a not-so-safe-distance is campaign worker Lena Jefferson (Karen Kendrick). But the action moves into high gear with the arrival of J.P.'s ex-wife, Evie, who has acquired an overflowing cornucopia of feminist enlightenment since her self-imposed exile from Atlanta.

Cleage eschews the very real substance of the election to focus on a domestic schism that, in essence, could have happened anytime, anywhere. There is also the clunky device about J.P. and Ann's original elopement that takes too much time to explain and lacks any thematic veracity. And despite frenzied action by all concerned, the only laugh-getter in this whole menagerie is Evie, who—despite a heroic effort by Caldwell—is given way too much to say and to do. Given Caldwell's fluency, Cleage could have reduced this effort into the one-person Evie play. It would have gotten more laughs in a lot less time.

The play's title refers to Evie's post-marriage sojourn to Paris, where she finally learned to love herself purely as herself, gaining the confidence to openly explore the wonders of positive self-realization. And by play's end, she easily casts aside everybody else's problems, as well as her own. Along the way, the rest of the ensemble acquits itself, despite the dramatic throughline imbalance. Kendrick gives credible evidence that if her Lena had been allowed to break out more, she could have offered strong counterbalance to Evie. Mitchell is properly sputtering and intractable as J.P., knowing in his heart that he is no match for his ex. The best thing about Brunson's Ann and Fuller's Nelson is they project an endearing, totally callow understanding of adulthood.

The production values of this second installment of the Colony's 40th season are admirable. Erven's afore-mentioned setting is complemented by designers Dianne K. Graebner (costumes), Jared A. Sayeg (lights), Dave Mickey (sound), and Orlando del la Paz (scenic art).

intellectual exercise trumps much of the text's emotional impact. Quite easily, the word *father* become *mother*, *he* becomes *she*, and so forth, and for the most part the meter still scans as Shakespeare wrote it. But the acting and the picturesque and effective staging in this production, co-directed by Geer and Melora Marshall, thrill where it matters most.

At the play's top, Geer's Lear is a bloated bag of ego. The flattery of elder sons Goneril (Aaron Hendry) and Regan (Christopher W. Jones) sits well with her. When she hears the simple "no more, nor less" from her youngest son, Cordeliana (Dane Oliver), Geer's Lear evidences a recognition that he may be speaking accurately and from a deeper love; but she's embarrassed and rejects him out of pride.

Lear takes a fall, despite the best efforts of her loyal advisors and companions. The Fool, more often seen in gender-blind casting than the other characters are, is here played by Marshall. Although the character is still referred to as "boy" and "sirrah," Marshall gives the Fool deep sisterly devotion and care, while maintaining the verbal comedy the role allows. Kent is played by Gerald C. Rivers in a Caribbean accent when face-to-face with the sane Lear, in standard English elsewhere. Lear, Fool, and Kent ride out the storm on the roof of Theatricum Botanicum's permanent two-story structure, the outdoor stage providing perfect ambience for the play's outdoor scenes.

Less easy to see, Edgar's main scene is enacted far house right. Edgar, though, is here called Eden, played with sturdy sincerity and a notably expressive voice by Willow Geer. Eden's sibling, Edmund in the original, is here Igraine, played with head-to-toe resentful ire by Abby Craden.

Other acting standouts are Alan Blumenfeld as the eye-gouged Gloucester and Frank Weidner as Goneril's henchman Oswald. But the night's biggest surprise is young Oliver, who plays Cordeliana with classic delivery and physicality, and who will undoubtedly shore up the company's needs in the up-and-coming-actor department. It's a thrill to watch him go a round with Geer.

Lines get rewritten to suit the gender shift. "Put'st down thine own

Mike Peebler directs *Equivocation* as a comedy with deep currents. Peebler gives the actors modern British accents (scholars debate whether those accents existed in Elizabethan England), but this helps differentiate among the characters. For example, Blumenfeld's Cecil is *veddy* upper class, whereas his Nate is lower-middle class. Franc Ross's Richard probably has the most accurate accent for the period: a clear but "rhotic" (pronouncing his Rs) speech.

As expected, considering Peebler's long familiarity with the outdoor Theatricum Botanicum stage, he makes wonderful use of the area, creating Cecil's office in the cozy loft above the theater's entrance, placing Shag's home against the sheltering structure at stage left, setting prison scenes in the second-story space, and of course using the expansive stage as the Globe. Best of all, Peebler choreographs the playing of a famous Shakespeare tragedy facing away from the audience, so we see the stagecraft in swordfights and beheadings.

The actors here throw themselves into the roles (all but Barton and Jackson Ross creating more than one), seeming to relish their time spent in Cain's world. There's not a misstep in the evening, and the opening-night audience, clearly Shakespeare-knowledgeable, caught every in-joke.

How ever could Shag handle his artistically volatile troupe? Turns out that the sense of fraternity among theatrical families is thicker than blood. How could he write a play for Cecil without violating his own sense of ethics and truth-telling? By equivocating. How can he finally see his daughter for who she is? Ah. That's one of life's mysteries even Cain can't solve.

September 9, 2014

Sept. 6-28. 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. The theater is outdoors, so bring a jacket, cushion, and a flashlight for the walk back to the car. Fri 8pm. \$10-37, children 6 and under free. (310) 455-3723.

www.theatricum.com

goo.gl/maps/Lgx2

Persians

Sept. 6-Oct. 5. 555 N. Third Street (at Cypress). Park in and enter from the shopping center structure. The theater is wheelchair-accessible. Thu-Fri 8pm, Sat 3pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time 2 hours and 30 minutes, including intermission. \$20-49, discounts available (818) 558-7000 ext. 15

www.ColonyTheatre.org

[Map](#)

Race

Kirk Douglas Theatre

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder



DeWanda Wise and Chris Bauer
Photo by Craig Schwartz

There was a time when seeing a new play by David Mamet promised an evening charged with electricity, a guaranteed celebration of just how stimulating and provocative art can be if the artist is willing to not give a proverbial rat's ass what people will think. With the LA debut of Mamet's newest play at the Douglas, however, all the circuits have been connected with the precise hand of a long-established pro, but the resulting charge is simply not the intense jolt it used to be.

Race unfolds in one room: the conference room of a well-heeled big-city law office, where partners Jack Lawson (Chris Bauer) and Henry Brown (Dominic Hoffman) are grilling a potential client to decide if they are willing to take on his controversial case. As the firm's comely intern Susan (DeWanda Wise) sits unobtrusively in the background taking notes on the meeting, pompous business mogul Charles Strickland (Jonno Roberts), accused of raping a young black girl he had been dating, grudgingly and half-heartedly tells his side of the events.

It's fairly apparent Strickland chose this firm to take his case, after releasing another, mainly because of the partners' make-up. Lawson is white, Brown is African-American. One would

brecches" becomes "liff'd up thine own skirt." Puzzlingly, however, here Lear says, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/To have a shameful child!"

One of theater's great stage directions, "Re-enter Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms," is staged by the Geer family with due respect to the text, as well as to the gender swap. After Lear has found Cordelia's body, hanged in prison, Ellen Geer emerges from a trap door in the stage, seeming to hoist Oliver up the stairs. In this version, at play's end, Edgar and Albany will share the throne.

Marshall McDaniel provides evocative original music, and Ian Flanders and McDaniel contribute scene-setting sound design. Speaking of even more of the Geer family, in grand Theatricum tradition the family dog gets a cameo, showing stage presence and not reacting to the awws of the audience.

June 10, 2014

June 7-Sept 28. 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. The theater is outdoors, bring a jacket, cushion, and a flashlight for the walk back to the car. Repertory schedule. \$10-37, children 6 and under free. (310) 455-3723.

www.theatricum.com

goo.gl/maps/Lgx2

Announcing ArtsInLA.com's Sage Awards for theater in 2013

Who says critics don't like anything? Our theater critics chose their tops of 2013, from best production through best fight choreography, and the crossover among our choices gave rise to a surprisingly large list.

Getty Villa's Barbara and Lawrence
Fleischman Theater

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



Will Bond and Ellen Lauren

The weighty ideas expressed in this piece have retained their potency from nearly 2,500 years ago. The skills and vibrancy of the actors here are flawless. Had the two elements meshed, this would be a perfect production.

Aaron Poochigian's translation of Aeschylus's tragedies—said to be the oldest surviving pieces of Western dramatic literature—retains the majesty of a classical work while letting the audience relax into the language and concepts. When the ghost of King Darius asks how his son's ego-driven invasion of a powerful neighboring nation can be anything but “brain disease,” who can help but nod in recognition and agreement? When his son Xerxes, the current king of Persia, returns from battle, only to say he suffers afresh from lack of a parade, it's horrifyingly clear this defeated leader's ego remains while his countrymen lost everything.

Any of the audience's connection to the text is also due to the deeply committed work by the actors. Stephen Duff Webber, playing Darius, turns that apparitional persona not into a somberly grandiose specter but instead into the court jester: speaking truths but with all the irony and liveliness one expects from the mentor archetype. Gian-Murray Gianino, playing Xerxes, emits all the self-delusion of the spoiled firstborn son, oblivious to the catastrophe he has caused by invading Greece. Playing the messenger, leaning on a weathered oar for a long, long, long time, Will Bond recites a history lesson and turns it into an action-adventure saga as he describes atheists in foxholes.

However, the magnificence of Ellen Lauren, playing the queen, trumps all. Widow of Darius, mother of Xerxes, Lauren's queen feels the weight of both men's choices and the current responsibility of being the sole clear-

assume the question would be whether the partners believe the man's story, but, as Lawson sermonizes to his protégée Susan, the man's innocence or guilt is unimportant. Instead, the question is whether or not they can persuade the jury that he's innocent. “He gets off,” Lawson pontificates, “because his entertainer—that would be me—put on a better show.” Asked at one point by Susan, who is also African-American, whether somewhere down deep he thinks black people are less intelligent than whites, Lawson quickly counters that he thinks all people are stupid and blacks are not exempt.

Under Scott Zigler's crisply slick direction, the production features a dynamic cast and design team that would be hard to better. And even though Mamet has created Susan as far more three-dimensional and instrumental to the plot than are any of his past female characters, something is missing here, especially in the play's highly predictable ending. The language and themes—not to mention the title—are just as provocative as in those exciting old *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo* days, but somehow the writing doesn't pack the wallop one would expect from one of our time's most courageous—and most feted—wordsmiths.

Perhaps we've all become inured to the sharply barbed language and skewering one-liners a new play by Mamet promises to deliver. Or perhaps the playwright has reached that place in his renown where he does give that aforementioned rat's ass after all. It's just that the usual rat-a-tat-tat urgency of his brilliant, daring early work seems somewhat subdued here. But don't give up hope. This is a guy with a few surprises up his sleeve yet, especially if he goes back to revisit that brashly youthful time when he didn't care what his audiences'—or his critics'—reaction would be.

September 8, 2014

Sept. 7-28. 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City. Free parking underneath City Hall, immediately south of the theater. Wed-Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 1pm & 6:30 pm. Running time 1 hour and 40 minutes, including intermission. \$20-55. (213) 628-2772.

www.CenterTheatreGroup.org
g.co/maps/ejjjf

Broadway Bound

Odyssey Theatre

Reviewed by Jonas Schwartz

And so we have decided to inaugurate our Sage Awards—named for the obvious reference to the wisdom we hope for, but also for the plant that covers the Los Angeles area, as we do.

Congratulations to the Sage Award winners, and we hope to share more great theater in 2014.

PRODUCTION

Ah, Wilderness!, Actors Co-op

El Grande de Coca Cola, Ruskin Group Theatre

Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty, Ahmanson Theatre

One Night in Miami..., Rogue Machine

Our Class, Son of Semele
Ensemble at Atwater Village Theatre

Pericles, Prince of Tyre, A Noise Within

The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center's Davidson/Valentini Theatre

The Nether, Kirk Douglas Theatre

The Scottsboro Boys, Ahmanson Theatre

We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915, Matrix Theatre

PLAYWRITING

Jennifer Haley, *The Nether*, Kirk Douglas Theatre

Bruce Norris, *A Parallelogram*, Mark Taper Forum

Kemp Powers, *One Night in Miami...*, Rogue Machine

Christopher Shinn, *Dying City*, Rogue Machine

Jackie Sibblies Drury, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation*

sighted one left at the top. Clarity of speech, electrifyingly intense physicality, and an apparently profound understanding of the text mark Lauren's work.

These actors, and those playing the ever-present chorus, form the SITI company, Anne Bogart's longtime ensemble. Intensively trained by Bogart, the actors work in a uniform and awe-inspiring style. They have firm, purposeful walks, their bare feet nearly as expressive as their speech. Some voices sounded forced and raspy in the huge outdoor space of the Getty Villa on opening night, one actor has an impenetrable accent, but otherwise the delivery is clear and "natural."

In Brian H Scott's design, broken bits of giant, presumably Greek, statuary litter the stage. Gold curtains forming the upstage wall rend as figures emerge, and the queen's gold veil and long train leave a trail of meaningless wealth. All wealth is worthless in the underworld, Darius points out.

But the audience spends its energy watching these things, not feeling them, not becoming immersed in the storytelling. Bogart's choreography, consisting of references to Greek dance and Greek pictorial art, is just that and not welling up from the characters. After all, isn't our hope for catharsis—a Greek word—the reason we go to theater?

September 5, 2014

Sept. 4-27. 17985 Pacific Coast Hwy., Pacific Palisades. Thu-Sat 8pm. Running time 90 minutes, no intermission. \$40-45. Parking is \$15 per car. (310) 440-7300.

getty.edu

goo.gl/maps/ZWLZW

Psyche: A Modern Rock Opera

Greenway Court Theatre

Reviewed by Bob Verini



Michael Mantell, Noah James, Betsy Zajko, Ian Alda, Allan Miller, and Gina Hecht
Photo by Enci

Jason Alexander, co-star of the original Broadway cast of *Broadway Bound*, directs this nostalgic piece with enough pathos and humor to stir audiences' hearts. Led by the sensitive actor Gina Hecht, the top-caliber cast mines Neil Simon's jokes for all their potency, while remaining grounded in this touching memoir of a family collapsing.

The final play of Simon's "Brighton Beach" trilogy, *Broadway Bound* is more dramatic and less jovial than *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Biloxi Blues*. In winter 1949, the Jerome family is at a crossroads as some members are climbing the capitalist ladder and others are tied to the pre-World War II world, have lost their way.

The narrator Eugene (Ian Alda) is no longer the naive child of the first play. He and his brother, Stanley (Noah James), have begun an exciting writing career. Their Aunt Blanche (Betsy Zajko), who in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* is a lonely widow struggling with two daughters, has married a wealthy man and now lives comfortably on Park Avenue.

Heartbreakingly, the marriage of parents Kate (Hecht) and Jack (Michael Mantell) is disintegrating. The noble, kind spirit that led the household in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* is gone. Jack has lost the integrity that Eugene idolized in that first play. Weak and sometimes cruel, Jack treats his family like strangers. Kate, who lives to serve her family, finds her boys growing up and her husband sneaking away, so her purpose is dwindling. Grandfather Ben (Allan Miller) ignores his ill wife and lives separately from her in the Jerome house, ranting Socialist rhetoric about how the country has fallen apart.

Dealing with the tragedy of growing old and growing apart, author Simon, who won a Tony for the play in 1986, still manages to be hilariously astute. Punch lines about the generation gap, familial bonds, and life in the lower middle class never mock the characters but shine a light on experiences many share.

Alexander, who played Stanley in the original production, displays a special affinity with these people, and that filters through to the cast. Miller, as the cantankerous but wise grandfather, plays the role with insight into Ben's values and into his

About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915, Matrix Theatre

ADAPTATION

David Ives, *The Liar*, Antaeus Company

Nancy Keystone, *Alcestis*, The Theatre @ Boston Court

Jessica Kubzansky, *R II*, The Theatre @ Boston Court

MUSICAL SCORE

Joe Iconis, *The Black Suits*, Kirk Douglas Theatre

John Kander and Fred Ebb, *The Scottsboro Boys*, Ahmanson Theatre

DIRECTION

Matthew McCray, *Our Class*, Son of Semele Ensemble at Atwater Village Theatre

Michael Peretzian, *Dying City*, Rogue Machine

Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

Ken Sawyer, *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later*, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center's Davidson/Valentini Theatre

MUSIC DIRECTION

Dennis Castellano, *The Fantasticks*, South Coast Repertory

Eric Heinly, *A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream*, Troubadour Theater Company at Falcon Theatre

Ross Seligman, *One Night With Janis Joplin*, Pasadena Playhouse

Robyn Wallace, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, Chance Theater

CHOREOGRAPHY

Rob Ashford, *Evita*, Pantages Theatre



Ashley Ruth Jones and Michael Starr

Photo by Barry Weiss

The unarguable triumph of *Psyche: A Modern Rock Opera* is the choreography of Janet Roston, which sets a company of 10, many of them veterans of university ballet and modern-dance programs, to dizzying displays of complex movement. From their first worshipful celebration of the young Psyche (Ashley Ruth Jones), through their incarnation of various spirits and demons doing the bidding of vengeful Greek gods, the ensemble is continuously expressive and interesting.

At several points Roston and director Michael Matthews bring in trapezes for airborne acrobatics; they're not as impressive as the aerial work we'll see at the Pantages in *Pippin* next month, yet somehow, perhaps because of their proximity to us, they come across as even more moving.

In other respects, *expressive, moving*, and *interesting* are not adjectives that can be consistently applied to Cindy Shapiro's two-and-a-quarter hour, through-sung, atonal Emo retelling, in semi-modern terms, of the myth of Psyche and Cupid (here called Eros, perhaps to avoid any distracting hint of Valentine's Day). Her score is one long moan, dynamically scored (by musical director Jack Wall) but lacking in eloquence and dramatic tension; the characters sing what they're feeling and rarely if ever use the music to make decisions or create action. "Life is so difficult I cannot bear it / I might as well end it" is typical of the on-the-money nature of the lyrics, and the device of having singers repeat their verbs ("You must follow, follow"; "It's time to travel, travel") grows stale.

Despite five pages' worth of program notes and synopsis, and excellent sound design by Cricket Myers, it proves virtually impossible to follow the narrative via visual or aural means; the existence of those five pages is actually a pretty potent hint that someone fears the audience won't catch on. Our lifeline, and the sole source of the evening's wit,

selfishness. Zajko brings tenderness to Blanche, a central character from the first play, now on the sidelines in the family, too wealthy to fit in anymore and too representative of everything her father hates to connect with him. Zajko makes it clear how much Blanche cares and how frustrating it must be to drift away when she can financially support the people who saved her and her children during the first play.

James is a firecracker as Stanley, filled with anxiety, hope, and combusive energy of someone on the brink of success. He flops around like a yippy dog, endearing his character to the audience. Mantell has a tougher role, and, due to either brave or unwise choices, his performance didn't ingratiate his character to the audience. It would take finesse to draw the audience to Jack despite his unlikable actions, and Mantell does not show the consternation in Jack's current soul. He comes off as merely a cad.

Eugene Morris Jerome has always represented the youthful exuberance, naiveté, and perceptiveness of Simon as a young man. It's a great service to Simon's voice that Ian Alda's performance is so winning. Marveling at the family his character would eventually write about, Alda's Eugene is observant, sensitive, and prescient.

But, Hecht holds the play together. Obstinate as a bull but protective and loving, her Kate is the Jewish mother audiences either cherish or wish they had. The play's pièce de résistance, a monologue about Kate's youthful dalliance with movie star George Raft, reveals a rebellious and passionate woman who may have been able to achieve more in a different world. Her foxtrot with Alda is graceful and touching.

Set designer Bruce Goodrich and prop designer Katherine S. Hunt have turned the stage into a lived-in Brighton Beach Jewish home of the late '40s with ironed doilies, hanging designer plates, sconces, and faded family photos. The costumes, by Kate Bergh, are appropriate for the period and this family's financial lot.

A special play, *Broadway Bound* is poetic in its interpretation of a family's struggles. Unlike Eugene O'Neill's, Tennessee Williams's, or Edward Albee's literary families, Simon's famous family rallies together under adversity, with comedy and love. Alexander's witty version is a valentine to families everywhere.

August 6, 2014

Aug. 2-Sept. 21. 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles. There is wheelchair access. Fri-Sat 8pm, with selected Wed and Thu perfs, Sun matinee times vary. \$30. (323) 960-4412.

www.odysseytheatre.com

g.co/maps/b9j59

Matthew Bourne, *Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty*, Ahmanson Theatre

Lee Martino, *Nuttin' but Hutton*, NoHo Arts Center

Arlene Phillips, *The Wizard of Oz*, Pantages Theatre

Susan Stroman, *The Scottsboro Boys*, Ahmanson Theatre

Kelly Todd, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, Chance Theater

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY

Ken Merckx, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

SCENIC DESIGN

Adrian W. Jones, *The Nether*, Kirk Douglas Theatre

Keith Mitchell, *Billy & Ray*, Falcon Theatre

Allen Moyer, *Parfumerie*, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

Jeanine A. Ringer, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

Thomas A. Walsh, *Annapurna*, Odyssey Theatre Ensemble and Evidence Room, at Odyssey Theatre

LIGHTING DESIGN

Ken Booth, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

Paule Constable, *Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty*, Ahmanson Theatre

Christopher Kuhl, *The Nether*, Kirk Douglas Theatre

David Lander, *Parfumerie*, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

Justin Townsend, *One Night With Janis Joplin*, Pasadena Playhouse

COSTUME DESIGN

Angela Balogh Calin, *Pericles*,

is projected footnotes (yep, still more commentary) to tell us what has just occurred or what is being said, which proves helpful but clunky. Often the comments are downright sassy, as in “Psyche is fucked” or “Eros is fucked.” What’s significant here is that the spectator would have absolutely no way of discerning the fuckedness of either character in the absence of those side notes, a sure sign that something on stage is simply not communicating.

If this work is to have a life beyond its six-week engagement at the Greenway Court, Shapiro might do well to introduce Psyche in such a way as to earn our empathy and interest. Right now she’s a construct who never comes alive as a character, and thus she inspires indifference. Shapiro would also be wise not to banish Eros (Michael Starr, an impressively chiseled hunk o’ beefcake) to the attic for the entirety of Act Two, like the first Mrs. Rochester; give him a love song to remind us he’s there, for Pete’s sake, and maybe one with a melody we can turn our ears and hearts around to, for once. And Eros is both the son and lover of Aphrodite (Laura L. Thomas, lively if pitchy); couldn’t more be done with that?

Despite all the great dancing and strong production values, *Psyche: A Modern Rock Opera* never escapes its crippling, pretentious self-importance. The soul of humanity, so the Greek myths tell us, was born at the hands of Psyche. Greater infusions of humanity couldn’t do *Psyche* any harm, for sure.

September 1, 2014

Aug. 29-Sept. 28. 544 N. Fairfax Blvd. (Free parking adjacent to the theater). Thu-Sat 8pm, Sun 7pm. \$34.99. (323) 655.7679 x100.

www.psycherockopera.com

g.co/maps/78vme

Prince of Tyre, A Noise Within

Lez Brotherston, *Matthew Bourne’s Sleeping Beauty*, Ahmanson Theatre

Michael Krass, *Parfumerie*, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

SOUND DESIGN

Jonathan Snipes, *Wait Until Dark*, Geffen Playhouse

PERFORMANCE IN A (PRIMARILY) STRAIGHT PLAY

Mark Bramhall (grandfather), *Walking the Tightrope*, 24th Street Theatre

Phil Crowley (Nat Miller, father), *Ah, Wilderness!*, Actors Co-Op

Jason Dechert (young Pericles and pandar), *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

Arye Gross (Mr. Sipos), *Parfumerie*, Wallis Annenberg Center

Robert Lesser (lawyer/Greek chorus), *A View From the Bridge*, Pacific Resident Theater

Dakin Matthews (Doyle), *The Nether*, Kirk Douglas Theatre

Seth Numrich (Eli), *Slipping*, Rattlestick Playwrights Theater at Lillian Theatre

Deborah Strang (narrator), *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, A Noise Within

Paige Lindsey White (Esme the granddaughter), *Walking the Tightrope*, 24th Street Theatre

PERFORMANCE IN A (PRIMARILY) MUSICAL PRODUCTION

Sabrina Elayne Carten (Blues Singer), *One Night With Janis Joplin*, Pasadena Playhouse

Nate Dendy (The Mute), *The Fantasticks*, South Coast Repertory

Mary Bridget Davies (Janis), *One*

Night With Janis Joplin,
Pasadena Playhouse

Jamie McKnight (Scarecrow),
The Wizard of Oz, Pantages
Theatre

Josh Young (Che), *Evita,*
Pantages Theatre

SOLO PERFORMANCE

Lorenzo Pisoni, *Humor Abuse,*
Mark Taper Forum

ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCE

The Katrina Comedy Fest,
Bayou Playhouse and Flambeaux
Productions at Lounge Theatre:
Peggy Blow, Deidrie Henry, Travis
Michael Holder**, Judy Jean Berns, L.
Trey Wilson, and Jan Munroe

One Night in Miami..., Rogue
Machine: Giovanni Adams, Kevin
Daniels, Jason Delane, Matt Jones, Ty
Jones, Jason E. Kelley, Burl Moseley,
and Jah Shams

Our Class, Son of Semele
Ensemble at Atwater Village
Theatre: Melina Bielefelt, Sharyn
Gabriel, Matt Kirkwood, Michael
Nehring, Gary Patent, Gavin Peretti,
Sarah Roseberg, Kiff Scholl, Dan Via,
and Alexander Wells

***The Laramie Project: Ten
Years Later,*** L.A. Gay & Lesbian
Center's Davidson/Valentini
Theatre: Johanna Chase, Paul
Haitkin, Michael Hanson, Elizabeth
Herron, Carl J. Johnson, Che Landon,
Ed F. Martin, Ann Noble, Dylan
Seaton, Christine Sloane, and Paul
Witten

The Scottsboro Boys, Ahmanson
Theatre: Gilbert L. Bailey II, David
Bazemore, Ayanna Berkshire, Shavey
Brown, Christopher James Culberson,
Joshua Henry, Trent Armand Kendall,
Max Kumangai, Hal Linden, JC
Montgomery, Justin Prescott, Clinton
Roane, Cedric Sanders, Deandre
Sevon, Christian Dante White, and C.
Kelly Wright

***We Are Proud to Present a
Presentation About the Herero
of Namibia, Formerly Known as
Southwest Africa, From the
German Sudwestafrika,
Between the Years 1884-1915,***
Matrix Theatre: Daniel Bess,
Julanne Chidi Hill, Joe Holt, Phil
LaMarr, Rebecca Mozo, and John Sloan

***Travis Michael Holder reviews for ArtsInLA.com. He did not nominate himself, nor did he nominate his show.

The voting theater critics of ArtsInLA.com: Travis Michael Holder, Dany Margolies, Julio Martinez, Dink O'Neal, Melinda Schupmann, and Bob Verini

January 5, 2014

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