

July 11, 2017

Shepherdstown's 2017 Contemporary American Theater Festival

Grace Cavalieri reviews six plays running through July 30, 2017, during the Shepherdstown, West Virginia's **CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATER FESTIVAL**, now in its 27th Year.



Bryce Michael Wood and Vincent Ramirez in *Welcome To Fear City* by Kara Lee Corthron. / Photo © Seth Freeman

Welcome to Fear City

WELCOME TO FEAR CITY by Kara Lee Corthron is a world premiere directed by Nicole A. Watson. This is the 1970s in the Bronx where blacks are beginning to rhyme their sorrow into hip-hop, “I don’t need to be famous— I need to be listened to and seen.” Dreams persist amidst poverty, unemployment, and family strife. “We spit out insults – go silent and nothing gets fixed.” “E,” a young hopeful (excellently done by Dyllon Burnside) compromises his morals by setting fire to a defunct building for a back door city reconstruction project. His mother’s need for medical help spurs his decision for fast money. Playwright Corthron makes old struggles new with crisp dialogue and adages that still work, “How come we’re not allowed to want things.”

The characters and actors are lovable and this helps the play. An inspired addition is a life-size RAT because surely rats were primary in the Bronx. (One character from Hoboken says “we only got little ones in New Jersey.”) The Rat is a Caliban from the forest of sewers, who through ugliness and cynicism goads the action to its dreadful conclusion. All this ruins a really nice kid who had “pretty little morals,” but after the arson says “I am a man. “ He adds “I just wanted to write music and word ...and be the way I am in my mind...” Good actors are assisted by smart sound, music, and movement.



Kate Udall in *Wild Horses* by Allison Gregory. / photo © Seth Freeman

Wild Horses

WILD HORSES by Allison Gregory, directed by Courtney Sale, is a one-woman show featuring Kate Udall. The audience marveled at 90-minutes of humor and mischief. It helps to have an actor you want to watch with body skills and a changing expressive face. We like her as soon as she saunters in but then it's the story that keeps us. This she does with the timing of a stand-up and the grace of an athlete, telling teenage exploits with versatility (playing 12 characters.)

Transitions are superb with shame, freedom, and fear braiding a plot including her mother, and older sister, plus friends who fuel the trouble. "Sweet Freedom" is what they want; and they want it for horses they believe to be abused on a nearby farm. The teen's experiment with liquor, stealing, trespassing, is told by actor Udall, who folds surprise into her lines. Nothing is better than momentum in a one-person show except a sense of wonder. And this our actor has.



Paul DeBoy and Lexi Lapp in *We Will Not Be Silent* by David Meyers. / photo © Seth Freeman

We Will Not Be Silent

WE WILL NOT BE SILENT by David Meyers is a world premiere directed by Ed Herendeen. A young woman, Sophie Scholl (Lexi Lapp) is being interrogated during the Nazi regime suspected of being the leader of the White Rose anti-Hitler movement. The interviewer, Kurt Grunwald (powerfully played by Paul Deboy) becomes manipulative, menacing, threatening, finally depriving our victim of food, water, and sleep. However this is not a one-dimensional Nazi. He wanted to be a poet and even knows philosophers, comparing notes with the theology student under arrest. She's able to hold her own against his slogans, "Just because we repeat a lie doesn't make it true."

Grunwald claims the Jews are just being resettled, battering her with logic: she "broke the law;" then coaxing, "You'll live to see the spring;" and the greatest ploy of all, that her brother has confessed and she'll be set free while he'll be sent to the SS for torture. The interviewer cannot force her to change, "You expect me to believe you're willing to be killed for ideas?" Yet the accuser believes in ideas as well and sometimes even in Sophie's motivations. This is the beauty of a script that would otherwise have been cat and mouse.

Grunwald changes tactics, constructs fiction, escalates the dialogue while her resistance is punished abused and ridiculed. He sneaks her chocolate, is it friendly or another strategy?

To be free she must only sign a pledge of allegiance to Hitler on radio and in public. Her resolve crumbles, if the stories in the Bible are not true, what is morality? And she, a prayerful Theist, begins to doubt. After visiting her brother who's condemned to death she knows she wants to live "for children; to walk in the forest; to write poetry; listen to music." She agrees to sign the pledge before the next day's execution. But does she? Lexi Lapp plays, very well, the part of a woman who actually lived. Questions of faith honor and courage are not new ones and more relevant this time in history than ever before. Intelligence is never boring and psychological action is the most powerful ballast in a drama of ideas.



Lucky Gretzinger and Jessica Savage in *Everything is Wonderful* by Chelsea Marcantel. / photo © Seth Freeman

Everything Is Wonderful

EVERYTHING IS WONDERFUL written by Chelsea Marcantel is a world premiere directed by Ed Herendeen. The title is something said by the Amish to deny their true feelings and to affirm a union with God. Lives are built on submission, surrender, forgiveness and reconciliation. But there's tragedy in Jacob and Esther's family where a drunken driver plowed into their horse and buggy killing their grown sons. The perpetrator appears at their house filled with remorse. He thinks he wants punishment. They forgive and take him into a household of duty, tasks and ritual. Ruth and Miri are daughters living with "whatever God wants" as a belief. The men believe daily work is their calling.

But beneath the tapestry real feelings roil and won't be subdued. Miri was raped by her young Amish suitor, Abram, and leaves home from humiliation. The Amish doctrine is confession: "speak, forgive, forget." Abram regains the community but Miri rebels against those who didn't stand with her. The play successfully moves back and forth across time when Miri returns home where Eric "the murderer" is living in peace while she's excommunicated, not even permitted to eat with the family, touch or be touched. She sees forgiveness as a cop-out, a way of saying Shut Up. Eric, once a drunk, now finds life a blessing, "to be a man. Close to God."

Upon Miri's return visit, young innocent 18-year-old Ruth is being courted by the very man who raped Miri and the situation explodes. A mother who repelled her daughter knows she loves her still. Although Miri believes Amish goodness "is to have no other choice," goodness does prevail and manifests for these kind people, seeing that their laws were not designed to divide. The actors play, gracefully and beautifully, a well written script.



Margaret Ivey in *The Niceties* by Eleanor Burgess. / photo © Seth Freeman

The Niceties

The Niceties, directed by Kimberly Senior is written by Eleanor Burgess. Professor Janine (well done by Robin Walsh) is calm, grounded, secure on the platform of excellent scholarship. The student, Zoe (strong actor Margaret Ivey) in her tutorial is polite, respectful and receptive. This is until the teacher points out that race did not “document” the American Revolution; and the student counters, arguing that race shaped it.

The conflict is between academic status-quo and a theory of radical revolution. Janine thinks her student’s work is immature and unsophisticated. The student thinks the professor is insensitive to black students, unconscious of racism, especially in her remark “digital savages.” The woman of color points to the fact that there are no insights in teaching George Washington. The play is about perspectives because Janine is a lesbian and recounts progress being made by careful actions. In fact her record as historian is based on solid academic study in her field. Zoe says policies are not people and the confrontation escalates until the student pulls out a cell phone on which everything is recorded.

“Not being open to her students’ needs” suspends Janine from teaching, cancels her book deal; and sullies her reputation. Zoe returns telling that she, herself, is the object of death threats and a ruined academic career. This taut drama focuses on George Washington as symbol. From the professor “democracy is the most important thing. For all Washington’s faults, he wrote history.” The contrarian says that no one asked slaves their experience therefore history books are half empty. Personal threats and ultimatums make this a psychological thriller of polarized reasoning. There’s no winner here, just combatants who perhaps pay too great a price for their opposing views— and clearly both teacher and student have much more to learn.



A scene from *Byhalia* / photo © Seth Freeman

Byhalia

Byhalia, Mississippi by Evan Linder is directed by Marc Masterson. If this is not ‘Broadway Bound,’ I’d be surprised. It’s a perfect piece of writing. Laurel (delightful Jessica Savage) and Jim (the terrific Jason Babinsky) are a married white couple waiting for their new baby, but surprise! the baby is born black! and Jim is more than a little freaked out, at first accusing his innocent friend, Karl (hilarious Yaegel T. Welch.) This

play is not as much about race as it is betrayal and trust. Jim says, "You killed my baby. I talked to that baby for months. You made me love someone who isn't even real." The baby's father, it turns out, is the school principal where Lauren works and, finally in comes the principle's wife (sharp Adrian Kiser) to add to the mix insisting Lauren cannot raise the baby. "You can't know how to raise a black man." She writes a check to move her out of town, bribery she calls kindness.

Not knowing what's going to happen is what makes theater great, and Laurel's mother Celeste helps (played magnificently by Hollis McCarthy.) She's all about immorality, people who don't love God, and people who are going to hell. The Truth reigns here because Laurel loves the baby (to hell with the town,) and Jim will too. Let's teach this play to our students to show what writing is; how characters are unique; the storyline that's strung from one to another; how to put a physical object in place that will affect all the events; and how well a playwright can balance humor and humanity.

The most exciting regional theater in the country offers its repertory of shows through July 30. Call 304-876-3473 or 800.999 CATF (or) www.catf.org (http://www.catf.org) for more information.

Grace Cavalieri is producer of public radio's "The Poet and the Poem from the Library of Congress," and columnist/ reviewer for *The Washington Independent Review of Books*.

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