

## There's No Business Like Reviewing-the-Shows Business

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 13 December 2005 18:00

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How wonderful and humbling the last eight months have been.

I've always been a theatre fan, and before joining the *Reader* staff full-time in April, I spent 11 years employed at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse. Yet my knowledge of the local stage scene was still mostly theoretical; with my work schedule dovetailing with other organizations' performance schedules, I rarely saw productions outside of those at the Rock Island venue.

After seeing nearly 50 shows in 34 weeks, though, I've come to realize that our area is not only alive with theatre but positively *rich* with it. And I'm astonished – and a bit ashamed – that I never really *noticed* before.

For instance, how had I never before been to the Playcrafters Barn Theatre? I made my first trek to the Moline venue – famed for light-hearted, crowd-pleasing fare – for the premiere of Melissa McBain's *Altar Call*, and I applaud the organization for tackling McBain's dramatic exploration of sin, homosexuality, and the church; it was a chancy selection that paid off big-time. I hope Playcrafters continues to take occasional risks of this sort – next year's dicey endeavor looks to be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which joins

a trio of comedies, a rare Playcrafters

*musical*

(

*Sweet & Hot*

) and

*Our Town*

in 2006. As for Playcrafters in 20

05

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,  
*Altar Call*

was followed by

*Enchanted April*

– perhaps the most purely charming show I saw all summer – which made up for a mediocre

*The Nerd*

and a poorly scripted

*It's a Wonderful Life*

. But even Playcrafters' lesser efforts were sincere, and they all boasted superior production design; I'm eager to see more.

A few weeks after my Playcrafters introduction, I visited the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo for the first time; their line-up, like Playcrafters', features audience-friendly comedies and dramas, but the scripts chosen for Richmond Hill – the venerable *You Can't Take It With You* notwithstanding –

were less overtly “popular” selections, and subsequently, made for quite intriguing viewing. (

*Another Part of the Forest*

and the hysterical

*Over the Tavern*

were new to me, and

*The Bad Seed*

rarely gets produced.) Next season's roster looks similarly eclectic, headlining one proven

audience-grabber (

*The Sunshine Boys*

), and two dramas –

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

and

*Proof*

– that I've been wanting to see staged for years. And the Richmond Hill players – who boast some sensational performers (see sidebar) – will be performing them, as they do all their works, in the round, a unique theatrical experience that makes this venue worth a look regardless of what's on the marquee.

As a huge fan of musicals, I am *embarrassed* to admit that, until this year, I had never seen a Music Guild production. I love seeing huge casts assembled, and I love listening to a live orchestra, and Music Guild offers both – outside of Davenport's Adler Theatre, currently under renovation, no area venue can match its scale. I'm disappointed that other engagements kept me from

*A Christmas Carol*, but their production

of *Fiddler on the Roof*

was terrifically well-done, and every time I think of the Guild's

*Beauty & the Beast*

– so joyously performed, so imaginatively conceived – I can't suppress my smile. I wasn't the biggest fan of

*Sugar*

, but 2005's show selections were all good ones for Moline's Prospect Park venue – they made excellent use of the stage space – and I looked forward to every visit. I look forward to next

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season, too;

*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown, Aida*

, and

*George M!*

are idiosyncratic choices for the 2006 line-up, and I'm always a sucker for

*The Wizard of Oz*

.

A good thing, too. I'll also be seeing it at the Timber Lake Playhouse next summer. I made my first visit to this Mt. Carroll summer-stock venue in June for *The Full Monty*, which promptly made me kick myself for not attending their 2005 productions of

*Ragtime*

and

*The Graduate*

; the show was staged and performed beautifully, Timber Lake's auditorium is large and inviting, and their stage space is, for a venue of its type, enormous. Despite its sitcom-y book,

*Monty*

was the

*grandest*

musical I'd seen all summer... and then Timber Lake's

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

came along in a production of

*Les Miz*

-like scope and ambition. Put simply, Timber Lake blew me away this summer. The venue's comedies –

*The Underpants*

and

*Late Nite Catechism 2*

– were a bit too slight for the space, but that's about the

*only*

complaint I'd have about Timber Lake's 2005 season. I cant

*wait*

to return in June.

On the lowa side of summer-stock, I managed to see every production in the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's 2005 season, so there was no Timber Lake-like surge of regret for missing anything. And, man, there *would* have been; show for show, I had a better time at the Showboat this summer than I did anywhere else. Beginning with *The*

*Sound of Music*

in June, the sweetness and charisma that exuded from the Showboat stage was a little overwhelming – suddenly, this old warhorse crackled with sincerity and skill. And then they did

*Ruthless*

. Funniest show I saw –

*anywhere*

– all year. From then on, every visit to the Showboat felt like a reunion with old friends, and although the limited stage space made their production of

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### *Beauty & the Beast*

less opulent than we may have hoped for,

### *Damn Yankees*

and

### *Don't Drink the Water*

fit just fine, and

*all*

of the shows were joyfully performed; if they can hire a similarly gifted ensemble next year, CAST's 2006 line-up –

### *The King & I, The Mousetrap, Anything Goes, Incredible Sex*

, and

### *Cabaret*

– might wind up equally inspired.

With the Timber Lake Playhouse set in the woods and the Showboat on the Mississippi, they're ideal settings for relaxed, summertime theatergoing. And I had a great time at Genesius Guild's productions this summer, too, spottier though they were; *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Knights*

had a lightness of spirit that perfectly matched the bucolic setting of Rock Island's Lincoln Park, and

### *The Pirates of Penzance*

– which Genesius co-presented with Opera @ Augustana – was exactly the right show for its early-summer slot. I missed

### *Oedipus at Colonus*

, but the other three were often clever, and

### *The Knights*

, with its freewheeling pop-culture (and Quad Cities-culture) references, showcased a really ingenious script by organization founder Don Wooten – I couldn't fathom why it had been nine years since my last visit to Genesius Guild. (And a note to potential audiences on limited budgets: Their shows are

*free*

.) Among next year's selections are

### *The Mikado, The Tempest,*

and

### *The Birds*

– not the Alfred Hitchcock one. Unless, perhaps, Don Wooten gets his hands on it.

Ingenuity was found in spades in the one Prenzie Players production I saw this year – *Twelfth Night* –

a show so dazzlingly imaginative and thrillingly performed that it truly took me off-guard. The Quad Cities' Prenzie Players paid Shakespeare due respect yet had great fun riffing on him, as well, and the addition of audience participation and musical interludes into the mix was inspired. The group's next endeavor, in April, will be the jolly, witty comedy

### *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

, a fine choice for what appears to be a jolly, witty organization.

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As for our area's Ghostlight Theatre Inc., the question isn't what's happening in 2006 but whether *anything* is happening; after Melissa Coulter quietly announced that she was vacating her role as Ghostlight's Artistic Director, the future of their 2006 selections – *J*  
*ames and the Giant Peach, Misery*  
, and  
*Assassins*  
– was uncertain. (Ghostlight's Web site, <http://www.ghostlighttheatre.org>)  
, hasn't been updated since Coulter's departure – she's still listed as the organization's contact person.) Ghostlight's board of directors was to have met this past weekend to discuss their 2006 plans, and I, for one, am crossing my fingers that the shows  
*do*  
go on; Ghostlight's 2006 line-up is a challenging, original one, and their 2005 productions of  
*The Will Rogers Follies*  
and  
*Noises Off*  
were quite winning –  
*Noises Off*  
, in particular, was sharply staged. Excepting my attendance at a dress rehearsal for  
*Gilligan's Island: The Musical*  
in March, these were the first two Ghostlight productions I'd ever seen – I'm hoping more are still on the way.

Like Ghostlight, Davenport's New Ground Theatre goes for offbeat play selections, yet more academically minded ones; there's nothing safe or middlebrow – or conventionally audience-pleasing – about their choices. (Since April, New Ground presented David Mamet's *Boston Marriage*  
, the mind-bender  
*Scotland Road*  
, and  
*Promise Ring*  
, an area debut.) In retrospect, I found these shows more enjoyable to think about later than to actually  
*view*  
– great thesis papers could probably be written about all three. Yet despite my hit-and-miss feelings about their 2005 output as a whole, I love that the organization is staging fresh material – the only way audiences will begin wanting new shows is by getting to  
*see*  
new shows. (New Ground will continue in this vein with 2006's  
*Boy Gets Girl*  
and  
*String Fever*  
.)

The upstart Rock Island company My Verona Productions, too, is devoted to works outside the realm of "traditional" area theatre, and had, at the ComedySportz venue, a similarly hit-and-miss

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year; it's hard to imagine that the same organization could deliver something as sharp as *Closer* and as smug as

*Dingo Boogaloo 2: Taco's Revenge*

(with

*Santaland Diaries, This is Our Youth*

, and a

*Dingo*

re-tooling –

2.5

! - all falling somewhere in between). But My Verona has certainly piqued my interest, and will probably continue to next year, with potential projects including Eric Bogosian's

*Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*

and

*The Graduate*.

Which brings us back – geographically, at least – to Circa '21. Audiences maybe expect more from this theatrical institution than they do other local venues, and that's because they *should*; Circa '21 has the best access to professional, national talent, boasts topnotch production-design capabilities, and has that staggeringly beautiful theatre housing its productions. That's why I want to kill myself when they stage inane material like

*Oh Mama! No Papa!*

or

*Meshuggah-Nuns!*

, scripts that no amount of talent could salvage. (A pretty safe rule of thumb: Avoid shows with exclamation points in the title.) But they're certainly capable of greatness, and this year,

*The King & I*

was superb, and

*Christmas from the Heart*

and the family musical

*Stuart Little*

are very entertaining. Besides, even when their shows are only half-good, like this summer's

*Pump Boys & Dinettes*

, the Circa '21

*experience*

(dinner, drinks, the Bootleggers) is exceedingly enjoyable. I adore the theatre for many personal reasons, but it's also a

*professional*

pleasure to be there – I'm thrilled that my 2005 career change still enables me to visit. (And yes, I love Circa '21 so much I will even sit through 2006's

*Grease. And Cats*

.)

So I experienced all this, plus a goodly amount of collegiate theatre, which should not be discounted; Augustana College's *The Laramie Project* and St. Ambrose University's *Urinetown* were among the finest shows I saw *anywhere*

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in 2005. And despite diving into the local theatre scene headfirst this year, there's so much *more*

to see – so far, I've only made one sojourn to the fantastically beautiful Old Creamery Theatre in the Amana Colonies, I missed this summer's Countryside Community Theatre productions in Eldridge (a slighting I endeavor to not repeat in 2006), I've yet to enjoy dinner-and-a-murder with the It's a Mystery players, I haven't explored the Iowa City theatre scene at *all* yet...

I was recently reminded of something I saw on the 2002 Academy Awards telecast. Early in the evening, documentarian Errol Morris presented a short film featuring dozens of interviewees, all of whom were discussing the joys of cinema. And toward the film's end, one of Morris's subjects gazed into the camera and said, smiling, "I'd rather see a mediocre movie than a good play."

After eight months of reviewing area theatre, I've determined that I would rather see a good play than do just about *anything*.

### **Kids Today... A Dozen Young Actors Worth Watching**

Chief among this critic's pleasures is the discovery of new talent. Although the following list is by no means exhaustive, these young actors – a few of them *really* young actors – were unknown to me before this year, and all displayed such natural ability, professionalism, and joy in performing, that I eagerly await their next stage appearances. As should you.

**Wilder Anderson** – One of 10 terrific ensemble players in Augustana's *The Laramie Project*, Anderson's Benedick in Genesis Guild's

*Much Ado About Nothing*

revealed Anderson's natural ease with Shakespearean language, sensational comic timing, and effortless stage charisma. He's Movie Star Handsome, too. I'd hate him if he wasn't so freaking *good*.

**Emily Burr** – It may have helped that she played such vastly different roles, but her put-upon hysteria in New Ground's *Boston Marriage* didn't prepare me for Burr's lovely gravity in My Verona's *Closer*, which didn't prepare me for her mysterious, potent turn in New Ground's *Scotland Road*.

. Burr seems, at this point, a true chameleon; I'm eager to not recognize her again soon.

**Bret Churchill** – This wonderful actor-singer began his Circa '21 tenure in April's *Pippi Longstocking*

, appeared in June's *Oh Mama! No Papa!*,

was a deliriously energetic Tigger in July's

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*Winnie the Pooh*

, and is a current delight in both

*Christmas from the Heart*

and

*Stuart Little*

. I'd say that Churchill was risking over-exposure at the venue, but that would suggest that we *wanted*

to see less of him.

**Ryan Mosher-Ohr** – With 19 to choose from, your favorite *You Can't Take It With You* character will likely vary with each production. In Richmond Hill's take on the classic charmer, mine was Mosher-Ohr's sublimely daffy ballerina, Essie; the actress played the role as if the conversations of the others were distracting her from the happy conversations going on in her *head*

– she was sweet, dizzy, and positively inspired.

**Simone Renault** – The Clinton Showboat's *Ruthless* was achingly hysterical, but Renault's comic confidence as the musical's monstrous show-biz baby was almost too good to be true. Now a freshman at Clinton High, this young actress was so devastatingly funny that she nearly stole the show from the stellar Katherine Walker Hill and the brilliant Gregory Harrell; brattiness has never seemed such an appealing character trait.

**Alex Ryser and Kelsey Guard** – Nearly everyone in Music Guild's *Beauty & the Beast* was marvelous, but these performers deserve mention for being so comedically assured in their Guild debuts. As Lefou, Ryser's cartoonish glee and inspired physicality continually cracked me (and the rest of the crowd) up, and whenever Guard's flirtatiously vibrant feather-duster, Babette, was onstage, you momentarily forgot that anyone else was up there

*with*

her.

**Miranda Lipes, Kevin Maynard, RJ Pratt, and Lucas Waller** – Combined, I doubt they're pushing 70 years old. But this youthful quartet made for such a hilarious – and, better yet, *believable*

– set of siblings in Richmond Hill's wonderful

*Over the Tavern*

that, nearly four months later, I can

*still*

feel their familial bond and hear their divinely dry line readings. (“Shalom” to you, too, Mr. Waller.)

**Hannah Waller** – Whatever the Wallers are putting in their breakfast cereal, I want some of it.

Lucas' sister – 10 years old when she played Richmond Hill's titular

*Bad Seed*

– found exactly the right combination of deeply funny and deeply creepy, and was unafraid to let the audience hate her, as was absolutely appropriate. I'm already hoping to see her and

Simone Renault duke it out in the

*Chicago*



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musical one day.