

## Let's Do the Time Warp Again: "Arcadia," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through August 26

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 22 August 2007 02:39

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Watching *Arcadia*, the Tom Stoppard jigsaw puzzle currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, is like watching a really engrossing foreign-language film without subtitles. You may not understand what's going on, but the actors and director seem to, so you strive to make sense of the proceedings through the performers' inflections, reactions, and occasional lines of dialogue where the meaning is evident. You find yourself desperately wanting to *get* it.

Yet, for this *Arcadia* viewer, at least, the strain proved too great. Just when I was beginning to grasp one of the playwright's heady, cleverly phrased theories of math, or theories of attraction,

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or theories of *theory*, he'd presented about five or six more; it seemed as though I was constantly racing after Stoppard and never caught up. Richmond Hill's production of *Arcadia*, under the direction of Jennifer Kingry, will likely make you feel either incredibly smart or incredibly stupid. No points for guessing how I felt.

I've heard that *Arcadia* is a beautiful read, and considering the playwright's gifts for structural precision, witty conversation, and perfectly elocuted *bon mots*, I have no reason to think otherwise. (Certainly the print version has a built-in advantage: You can back up and re-read passages you didn't comprehend the first time around.)

Stoppard's offering takes place at an English country estate during two parallel time frames: in 1809, when houseguest Septimus Hodge (Aaron Sullivan) tutors a teenage math prodigy (Carrie Clark) while an unseen Lord Byron vacations in an adjacent room; and in the present day, when authors Hannah Jarvis (Jessica Nicol) and Bernard Nightingale (Chris White) squabble over the historical accuracy and significance of Hodge's and Byron's visits, while mathematician Valentine Coverly (Jeremy Mahr) works through the prodigy's algorithms.

There's more (oh, God, is there more), including several scandalous affairs, a potential duel, a mute houseboy, and an uncooperative turtle, but I'd rather not give the impression that I understood more than I did.

I'll readily accept a healthy dose of responsibility for being so stymied by the piece, as I didn't peruse *Arcadia*'s program before the show began; if I had, I would've found its "glossary of themes and names" and its collection of 19 "other interesting things to know," which might've cleared up some confusion about who was whose lover, and who owned which property, and what Fermat's Last Theorem had to do with anything. (According to the *New York Times*

, which I thank for what post-*Arcadia*

comprehension I've amassed, the show's Broadway playbill included several companion pieces on mathematics, classicism, Romanticism, and Byron.)

However, I'm of the mind that it shouldn't require two pages of background information to enjoy a play - not one performed in *English*, at any

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rate - so it's entirely possible that I'm simply too

*dense*

for

*Arcadia*

, as I can't pinpoint exactly what might have been wrong with the production itself. (Based on Friday night's show, others may have felt as I did; the audience seemed unusually fidgety - there was a lot of rifling through programs - and even unusually

*talkative*

.)



Kingry's staging and pacing were impressive, and not only were there were no bum performances, but quite a few *outstanding* ones. Michael B. Miller and Stan Weimer delivered brief, topnotch character turns, Nicol and White sparred with great finesse, and it was a thrill seeing so many talents enlisted from the Shakespeare troupe the Prenzie Players (Sullivan, Mahr, Clark, Maggie Woolley, Matt Moody), who appeared focused, committed, and keenly intelligent.

You can feel the audience's collective relief during the cast's more overtly comedic bits - Woolley's coy flirtation with White, Sullivan's caustic undermining of Ken Ohr's houseguest, Nicol's and White's sarcastically incredulous one-upmanship - and the actors do what they can to lighten or even *disguise* the esotericism. But it doesn't seem there's much they *could* do. Just about every conversation is concerned solely with intangibles; characters are forever theorizing and hypothesizing, and when they're not, they're discussing figures, such as Byron, who don't exist on-stage. In the end, my main beef with the production lies with the material itself: There's far too much telling and not nearly enough showing.

And as much as I traditionally adore Richmond Hill's theatre-in-the-round setup, I'll venture that it's probably not the ideal way to experience *Arcadia*, as Stoppard's dialogue practically has a proscenium arch built into it; for full understanding of what's being said, it's important not only to see characters orating but the reactions of those they're orating *to*.

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(We miss out on much of the dialogue's import by only seeing the backs of heads.) Richmond Hill's production is just engaging and intriguing enough to make me eager to read Stoppard's script. Whether I'll ever want to *see Arcadia* again is another matter entirely.

*For tickets, call (309) 944-2244.*