

Writers' Block Party: "Romance Language," at Augustana College through May 11

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 07 May 2008 02:29



If you majored in English, or are currently majoring in English, or simply *wish* that you'd majored in English, Peter Parnell's comic fantasia

Romance Language

might sound like an almost obscene amount of fun. Or perhaps merely obscene, as Augustana College's latest presentation finds Walt Whitman traveling cross-country with Huck Finn, Ralph Waldo Emerson pining over the deceased Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson abandoning her lesbian lover for a Native American warrior, Louisa May Alcott embracing her wild side as an uninhibited dance-hall girl The experience of

Romance Language

is like tumbling down Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole and landing smack in the middle of a 19th Century American Literature course.

As an English major myself, I say: *Awesome*.

Over the course of 16 scenes, a series of famed historical figures find their fates intertwined *en route*

to a climactic Battle of Little Big Horn. That's about as bare-bones a synopsis of the plot as I can give you, because the show's real "story" is the search for identity - personal, sexual, and above all national. (Parnell's theme could adequately be described as "America.") With its period authors conversationally reciting lines from their works and behaving, more or less, just like their readers always

suspected

they might,

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is part prolonged in-joke and part intellectual exercise, and in all honesty, it frequently borders on the ridiculous.

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Happily, it never gets there. Always knowingly theatrical, the show is composed of a series of wild narrative imaginings that wind up having extraordinary cumulative impact, both comedically *and* dramatically - *Romance Language* features some fierce exchanges and beautiful, searching monologues - and it's filled with the sorts of expansive, meaty roles that actors can have a ball in.

And, in Augustana's production, *do*. Director Mike Heather does a lot of strong work here; his tableaux, particularly after the Act II suicide, are frequently exceptional, and the show's technical elements - especially Ben Webb's inventive scenic design and Ellen Dixon's sublime costumes - could hardly be bettered. But his finest accomplishment seems to be in establishing an atmosphere that brings out such confident, honest performances from his cast.



Walt Whitman, who leads us through Parnell's dreamscape, is the central character of the play's 29-person ensemble, and it took me a few scenes to realize just *how* good Brian Bengtson is in the role. Buried beneath the iconic Whitman beard and hairdo, this frequently explosive comic powerhouse seemed unusually reserved in his first scenes, until his performance eventually revealed itself - this Whitman is a man whose charisma lies in his *words*

. Bengtson always exudes commitment and displays sharp timing, but when, late in Act I, Whitman finally get to own the stage with a haunting, regretful oration, the actor seems lit from within; Bengtson, here, gives a rare kind of performance - one that's passionately underplayed.

As Emerson, David Cocks actually has the prototypical Brian Bengtson role in *Romance Language* . It's a fair trade; the actor is magnificent in it. Barking out the author's grievances and tirades with bitter gusto, Cocks' every reading is unpredictable, as is his ability to switch from hilarious to poignant on a dime. (Emerson's continual, aching plea for "Henry David!" all but becomes a four-syllable aria of regret.) And Jeff LaRocque, whose spectral Thoreau is constantly seeking

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the peace of Walden Pond, provides lovely layers of melancholy and several unanticipated laughs, as the deceased Thoreau is in constant, frenzied hiding from his many admirers.

Katie Wyant is truly stunning as Dickinson. The actress' low, measured cadences and apologetic physicality seem a perfect match for our image of the author, and Wyant's slightly dazed comic expressiveness is a stitch, whether she's reacting to actress Charlotte Cushman's face in her lap, or engaging in a lobotomized attempt at a Native American dance. Kyle Roggenbuck, meanwhile, delivers a wonderfully magnetic and insinuating Cushman to Wylie's vanishing Dickinson; the actress' romantic tension is palpable. (Kudos, by the way, to Friday's opening-night audience for not snickering at the sight of female actors kissing, and for only *slightly* snickering at the sight of male actors kissing.)

Liz Stigler and scenic designer Webb, in their roles as Alcott and General George Custer, hint at their characters' troubled souls while sharing a sensationally vicious romantic encounter; Stigler's reading of "Must your wife go through this *every night*?" might single-handedly be worth *Romance Language's* ticket price. Kevin Wender is a sweetly self-loathing Autie Reed; J. Blake Norris, Rachel Krein, Elizabeth Riordan, Ken Robinson, and Jon Schweppe offer sharp portrayals; and Katie McCarthy is appropriately, unfailingly plucky as Huck Finn. (Her reverse-gender casting leads to a terrifically surreal moment when she and Eliza Bockstahler's Tom Sawyer are dressed as boys disguised as girls.)

And as the transvestite entertainer Madame Nash, Justin Schaller provides an extraordinarily naturalistic, funny, fearless performance; his soulfully sad, moving turn gives *Romance Language* a stinging emotional center that, at its start, you never could have anticipated. But then again, nearly everything about Augustana's season-closer turns out to be a most unusual, most welcome surprise.

For tickets, call (309) 794-7306.