

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 21 September 2009 06:00

- [Discount - Autodesk AutoCAD Electrical 2011](#)
- [9.95\\$ Lynda.com - Photoshop for Designers: Layer Effects cheap oem](#)
- [Buy Microsoft Windows Server 2003 Enterprise R2 SP2 \(32 bit\) \(en\)](#)
- [Discount - Adobe Flash Builder 4.5 Premium](#)
- [Buy Cheap Microsoft Visual Studio LightSwitch 2011](#)
- [29.95\\$ Micromat TechTool Pro 6 MAC \(32-bit\) cheap oem](#)
- [Buy Arobas Music Guitar Pro 6 MAC \(en\)](#)
- [Buy Sony ACID Pro 6 \(en\)](#)
- [Buy Cheap Autodesk AutoCAD Mechanical 2012 \(32-bit\)](#)
- [Download Infinite Skills - Learning Python Programming](#)
- [Buy Cheap Autodesk AutoCAD Structural Detailing 2012 \(32-bit\)](#)
- [Discount - CorelDRAW Graphics Suite X6 \(32-bit\)](#)
- [Buy Cheap Avanquest Partition Commander Server Edition 10](#)



Running a brisk 60 minutes, the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's presentation of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is energetic and entertaining, and with James Bleecker and Steve Quartell portraying the two men in Albee's two-man tragicomedy, the production was all but guaranteed to be well-performed. And it is.

Yet despite my considerable fondness for the material and the talents involved, I thought this *Zoo Story* would've greatly benefited from being re-cast; not with different actors, but with the same actors playing opposite parts. Neither of the performers is really age-appropriate for their middle-aged characters here, but in terms of performance style, Bleecker's pointed, imploring directness seems so right for Albee's Jerry, and Quartell's cagey emotional reserve seems so right for Peter, that it's more than a little surprising to see Bleecker, instead, cast as Peter, and Quartell as Jerry. (Given director Tristan Tapscott's familiarity with the actors, though -- both are associate producers at the Harrison Hilltop -- this casting against type has to have been intentional.)

For those unacquainted with Albee's legendary "park bench play," *The Zoo Story* opens with Peter, a pleasantly composed husband and father, whiling away an afternoon with a book in Central Park. (In a nice touch on Thursday, Bleecker was positioned on-stage, and remained happily fixated on his novel, while nearby patrons chatted and helped themselves to pre-performance hors d'oeuvres; considering the novel was

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 21 September 2009 06:00

The Catcher in the Rye

, the actor's engrossment was understandable.) Peter's solitude, though, is quickly interrupted by the arrival of Jerry, a mysterious, loquacious, and deeply troubled man who engages Peter in conversation.

And that's pretty much the plot, although the simplicity of *The Zoo Story's* setup doesn't hint at the broadness of its themes.

Through the course of the play, Jerry's rants, jokes, threats, and re-creations of past encounters begin to paint an indelible portrait of alienation, loneliness, and crippling despair; Peter's presence, meanwhile, reveals the hollowness and detachment that comes from living an unexamined life, and the aching impossibility of the American dream.

Or at least, Albee's play *can* explore those themes. Beyond the fact that you really just need a strong director, two strong actors, and a park bench to pull it off effectively, the reason the show has endured for more than half a century is that it's endlessly malleable and debatable --

The Zoo Story

can mean what you

want

it mean, even if you don't want it to mean

anything,

and are simply looking for an hour's worth of juicy dialogue and adventurous performances.

These qualities are definitely on-hand here; 51 years after the show's debut, Albee's language retains its bite and unwavering eccentricity, and the committed actors come through with funny, clever moments throughout. Yet what was missing from Thursday's production -- or rather, what was missing for me -- was a sense of larger scope, of *meaning*, which seemed to stem from the decision to present Jerry, from the start, as a twitchy, neurotic, overtly hostile basket case.

As Quartell plays him, Jerry is so obviously unhinged that I not only didn't buy Peter's interest in continuing their conversation, but couldn't understand why he didn't hightail it out of the park at his first given opportunity. Yes, Jerry is meant to be a bit of a loon. For Albee's conceit to fully work, though, he also has to be charming, friendly, and empathetic, even if only on the surface; you have to believe there's a *reason* for Peter to put up with him for as long as he does. The idea of having Peter reading (and enjoying)

Rye

Catcher in the

is a smart

one, as you can imagine the man wanting to reach out to Jerry

à la

Holden Caulfield, another damaged figure in desperate need of a friend. But while you can

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 21 September 2009 06:00

intellectualize the characters' connection here, you don't
feel

it, because Quartell's frequently inventive readings -- as if he were vocalizing an interior monologue that Peter just happened to overhear -- don't suggest Jerry's anguish and heartbreaking neediness. The actor's technically impeccable but emotionally neutral performance keeps both Peter and the audience at arm's length; he's a loon, yet little more.

Quartell was superb as a closeted gay Mormon in the Green Room's *Angels in America* productions last year, and as the taciturn, increasingly incensed Carlos in the Harrison Hilltop's *La Llorona*

this past spring -- roles in which the actor's natural reserve was used advantageously. But Jerry is about as spontaneous and emotionally naked a character as they come, and very little about Quartell's work here feels spontaneous or emotionally naked. He has brilliant moments -- on Thursday, the actor offered a priceless reaction following his mention of Jerry's hot plate, as if to say, "Don't steal my hot plate" -- and his delivery of Jerry's lengthy monologue about a feral dog was terrifically impressive. You can see the thought and dedication that went into the crafting of this performance. Still, you're always aware of it

as

a performance. Quartell has the externals of crazy down pat, but doesn't appear very comfortable about revealing Jerry's soul.

Bleecker, on the other hand, can't seem to *help* revealing a character's soul. (Beyond his overwhelming turn as Edmund in the recent

Lo

ng Day's Journey Into Night

, the actor's dazzling performance in the Harrison Hilltop's one-man

Thom Pain [based on nothing]

exploded with confusion, heartache, and panic.) In

The Zoo Story,

though, Bleecker's openness and inherent, boyish likeability lead to our missing much of the show's point; his Peter is in no way the symbol of societal malaise that Jerry is tortured by, and feels compelled to retaliate against. Peter may be designed as an audience surrogate, but he also, on occasion, has to be something of a jerk, and despite Bleecker's buoyant naturalism and enormous talent, this Peter is too blameless -- too unwaveringly

good --

to be terribly interesting, or to be of much benefit to Albee's text.

I'm all for nontraditional casting, but throughout this *Zoo Story*, I kept thinking: What if Bleecker, with his fiercely emotional frankness, had instead been given a shot at Jerry? And what if Quartell, with his effortless cool and knack for cunningly underplayed comedy, had taken on Peter?
By no means is the

Park and Re-creations: “The Zoo Story,” at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through September 27

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 21 September 2009 06:00

Harrison Hilltop's new offering

a failure -- there's speed and wit in Tapscott's orchestration of the actors' verbal rhythms, and the repartee is so polished that it gleams. The show is a more than fine time. For all of its stars' enthusiasm, however, they inadvertently suggest what a

better

time it might've been had their roles had been reversed.

For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .