

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 14 June 2010 06:00

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Thursday's opening night performance of *Sunday in the Park with George* was far more of an emotional experience than I had anticipated. Prior to opening night, cast members posted Facebook messages saying rehearsals were moving them to tears, and chalking it up to their emotions being heightened by the experience of doing the show - as can often happen with a cast and crew - I didn't expect to be equally moved. I was wrong, with tears streaming down my face multiple times during the performance.

Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* was inspired by the painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" by Georges Seurat (played here by Bryan Tank). It's a fictionalized account of Seurat's creation of his masterpiece and its destruction of his personal life, mainly due to his single-minded concentration on his painting and the emotional exclusion and subsequent loss of his love, Dot (Melissa Anderson Clark).

Director David Turley's cast is the first large cast I've seen on a local stage that I wouldn't change a bit, with Tank leading the way as Georges in Act I, and his great grandson, also named George, in Act II. I can't decide if it's more accurate to say that Tank is perfect for the role or the role is perfect for Tank. Either way, they suit each other. Tank exudes an intensity in every performance of his I've seen, an intensity which, more than any of his other roles, best matches the single-mindedness of Georges. His voice, however - with its purity and richness - even manages to outshine his acting. (I wouldn't mind if Tank just stood center stage and sang through the entire show all by himself.)

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While Tank is intense, Anderson Clark is playful. She approaches her role in earnest, but maintains a sense of humor throughout, making for some of the production's most amusing moments through surprisingly simple inflections or grand gestures and facial expressions. Clark is an actress who seems to both easily and naturally convey the comic aspects of her role.



The rest of the cast could easily fade into the background behind Tank and Clark. It's to their credit that they don't, with every actor leaving an indelible impression, no matter how small their parts. Of particular note, Pamela Crouch is so sweet as the nurse that you root for her success at an attempted liaison with a married man. James Bleecker offers what is arguably his funniest performance to date as Franz, with an impressively consistent German accent and spot-on comic timing. (His Dennis in Act II is the complete opposite, gentle rather than jovial, but with as impressive a turn.) Mark Ruebling shines as Jules, a character that could easily be portrayed as a one-dimensional villain; instead, Ruebling adds his usual brand of slight silliness, softening the character to something more likable and amusing.

Angela Elliott's Blair Daniels briefly steals the show during Act II, with her condescending yet approachable art-critic attitude. Wendy Czekalski brings down the house as Frieda; like Clark and Bleecker, Czekalski understands the underlying humor in her role and how to highlight it in her performance. And Sara Bourassa and Sara Pethoud are delightfully improper as Celeste and Celeste 2, with Pethoud pacing her line deliveries particularly well, making her dialogue even funnier than it's written.

The only distraction for me in Harrison Hilltop's production, and it's a minor one, lied with the performance space itself. While the black walls serve the second act well, they don't seem to fit the first. Derek Bertelsen's costumes account for the entirety of color in Act I (and quite nicely), but it seems to me - since the show is based on a painting that's known for its color - that there should be more of it on the set. The stark blackness does, although, allow set designer Chris Walljasper's clever use of a large picture frame to stand out, making its conceptual purpose clearer.

## Que Seurat, Seurat: "Sunday in the Park with George," at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through June 26

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As much as I love theatre, it's not often I come across a production that rises above the rest as a "must-see" in my book. Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Sunday in the Park with George* reaches that height. I don't think there was an empty seat in the house on opening night. It would be a shame if there's a seat available any night during the rest of its run.

*For tickets and information, call (563) 449-6371 or visit [HarrisonHilltop.com](http://HarrisonHilltop.com).*

*Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.*