

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (Arden): Exceeds all expectations

November 3, 2014 - Nicholas Ryan



Josh Carpenter (left) as Pip and Sally Mercer as Miss Havisham in the Arden Theatre Company's GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Forget everything you ever knew about the Charles Dickens classic. With a perfect combination of passion, pride, storytelling, and imagination, the Arden Theatre Company's production of GREAT EXPECTATIONS is a thrilling night of theater.

Pip (Josh Carpenter) is a young orphan "raised by hand" (picture a mimed slap) by his older sister (Sally Mercer) and her blacksmith husband (Lindsay Smalling). As he seeks to raise his station to that of a gentleman, Pip encounters a raft of classically Dickensian characters: a convict, an elderly woman still clad in the wedding dress from a wedding which never happened, the cold-hearted love of his life, an

urbane lawyer, a mysterious benefactor, a spider of a man, and over 30 more characters—all played by six actors in the two and a half hours of this superbly choreographed theatrical masterpiece. By the end of the show, Pip rediscovers his true self and realizes that life is not about finding success or being a wealthy gentleman, but the relationships you make with the people you encounter to get you there.

Josh Carpenter is a pleasure to watch; he brings wonder, innocence, and new life to his Pip. Other than Carpenter, each "narrator" has

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perhaps ten different roles, some polar opposites of each other. Brian McCann shows remarkable skill and flexibility in such characters as the convict Magwitch and the lawyer Mr. Jaggers. Lindsay Smiling's portrayals make us love his characters (the humble blacksmith Joe, the publicly unflinching but privately kind-hearted Mr Wemmick), even those we love to hate (the dourly pompous Bentley Drummle). Doug Hara provides wonderful ensemble work, seamlessly transitioning between many personas. Sally Mercer gives some of the most memorable performances in the piece, playing a range of vastly different characters, including Pip's abusive sister and the spurned and spiteful Miss Havisham. Compared to the rest of the cast, Kate Czajkowski disappoints; she struggles to differentiate between her characters, and her Estella (Pip's unobtainable love) is at times wooden rather than emotionally suppressed.



Josh Carpenter as Pip and Brian McCann as Magwitch in Arden Theatre Company's production of GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Timothy R. Mackabee's minimalist stage design (like a country barn) gives director Matthew Decker and choreographer Scott McPheeters an adaptable canvas on which to bring forth the mesmerizing staging. . Atmospheric lighting (Thom Weaver) and sound (Rick Sims) add to the theatrical magic. Costumes, designed by Olivera Gajic, are gorgeous to look at and are easily removed for insanely quick changes, making the transitions between characters identifiable and flawless.

Gale Childs Daly's adaptation captures the delightful characters and touching story of Dickens's novel. The deft choreography and spot-on acting bring it to life, creating an entrancing theatrical piece to exceed even our greatest expectations. [Arden Theatre Company, 40 N. 2nd Street] **October 23-December 14;** ardentheatre.org.

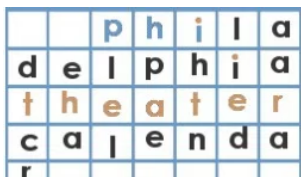
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About the author



Nicholas Ryan

Nicholas Ryan is an experienced actor and director; he has won several awards for his stage work including the Paper Mill Playhouse Rising Star Award. He attends college in pursuit of a BFA in Theatre Directing at the University of The Arts right here in Philadelphia.

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A Special Production Of PARADE Comes To Center City, Philadelphia

by BWW News Desk Mar. 15, 2018

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An unprecedented production of the Tony award-winning musical drama, PARADE, is set to open in Center City, Philadelphia this Spring.

Amid religious intolerance, political injustice and racial tension, the stirring Tony Award-winning PARADE explores the endurance of love and hope against all the odds. With a book by acclaimed playwright [Alfred Uhry](#) (Driving Miss Daisy) and a rousing, colorful and haunting score by [Jason Robert Brown](#) (Songs For a New World, The Last Five Years, Bridges of Madison County), PARADE is a moving examination of the darkest corners of America's history.

In 1913, Leo Frank, a Brooklyn-raised Jew living in Georgia, is put on trial for the murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, a factory worker under his employ. Already guilty in the eyes of everyone around him, a sensationalist publisher and a janitor's false testimony seal Leo's fate. His only defenders are a governor with a conscience and, eventually, his assimilated Southern wife who finds the strength and love to become his greatest champion.

The production is set to open on April 26, (still known in some states as Confederate Memorial Day) and will only run into the next evening April 27. The show is to be produced by the University Of The Arts College Democrats organization, with performances being held at the Arts Bank Theatre on Broad Street.

The cast of 28 is comprised of students from all over the university in all different majors. The creative team is also comprised of students at the school. Set to direct the show is Nicholas Wainwright '18 (NJACT nominee, and director of the sold-out Hunchback of Notre Dame at UArts last season), also on the team is choreographer- Rachel Sampson '18, Musical Director- Maura Sitzmann '19, Conductor- David Thomas '19, Stage Manager- Meagan Spry '18, and Assistant Director/Dramaturg- Rose Slavin '20.

The UArts College Democrats organization explains the show will be followed by a brief talkback panel with the creative team and invited politicians to talk of the show's importance and relevance in today's climate.

Per director Nicholas Wainwright, "PARADE is not only culturally relevant in today's political climate and "fake news" phenomenon, but we as artists have a platform to change perspectives and tell traumatic stories that leave a significant impact on audiences. Parade promises to be quite an illuminating evening of theatre and inventive storytelling."

PARADE has a limited run from April 26-27 only. (2 performances at 8:00 PM). Admission: Pay what you can, tickets go on sale April 2, 2018 @ 10:00 AM. Reserve your seats via: <https://uartsdems.ticketleap.com/parade/>. The Arts Bank Theatre, 601 S Broad St. Philadelphia PA, 19107.

The cast list is as follows:

Cast:
Leo - Matt Donzella
Lucille - Anna Nicole Vantor
Mary Phagan - Maryellen Molnar
Frankie - Ethan Abrams
Jim - [Jeremy Mitchell](#) Cousar
Craig - Devon Spencer Lynch

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THE STINKY CHEESE MAN (Arden): No cheese smells this good

April 19, 2016 - Nicholas Ryan



The cast of THE STINKY CHEESE MAN.

Photo by Mark Garvin.

It's hard to know what to expect going into a children's theater show, but this adult was quite honestly blown away by THE STINKY CHEESE MAN. The Arden Theatre Company production is a triumph of the imagination. Patrons young and old are enthralled and captivated by the "fairly stupid tales" told by a troupe of five actors. Greatest of all is the reaction of the children in the theater, who laugh, shout, and applaud for the performances.

A narrator, who seems a bit nervous for the production to start, greets us with a curtain speech filled of course with numerous interruptions from the other characters on stage. Following an hysterical opening number, comes a whirlwind of fairy tales told in a new and contemporary way.

Based on Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's book of the same name, STINKY CHEESE MAN adapts famous stories such as "The Ugly Duckling", "Cinderella", and "Chicken Little" into "fairly stupid" tales with horribly pointless outcomes.

The result of John Glore's adaptation is an evening of laughter from both parents and children that reminds us of the importance of the arts in children's lives. After hijinks and hysteria galore, the evening comes to a close with a cow patty the size of a couch coming through the audience. The effect enraptures the audience as if they are watching the infamous chandelier fall in the lavishly expensive Broadway production of *Phantom Of The Opera*: this is theater magic at its best.

The cast is the key to the success of this piece; all five actors (Doug Hara, Rachel Camp, Ashton Carter, Leah Walton, and Scott Sheppard) are on point with comedic timing and delivery. The quick changes happen remarkably fast. The highlight of the night has to be the Stinky Cheese Man sequence, (an adaptation of the Gingerbread man). Not one weak link is present in this glorious cast.

As in previous efforts I've witnessed by Matt Decker, the direction is phenomenal. The stage pictures and compositions he creates are gorgeously crafted, and the timing and flow of the piece in general is perfect

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(which I assume should also be credited to choreographer Jenn Rose).

Scenic design by Brian Sidney Bembridge aids in the storytelling while still holding its own concept, which is quite contemporary and colorful. Costumes by Jillian Keys are gorgeous: well-crafted recycled materials that line up with the concept of the set-with just enough glitz to tell us who's who, while keeping them human. Lights and sound by Maria Shaplin and Michael Kiley are set perfectly and help set the mood of the production. The highlight perhaps of Mr. Kiley's work is his original music written for the show. While it uses and borrows famous melodies, the twist in the soundtrack and lyrics help the show move along and even holds some highlights of the entire production within.

Overall THE STINKY CHEESE MAN proves that children's theater can still serve its purpose without talking down to its audience. The Arden's STINKY CHEESE MAN sets a new precedent for what a children's theater production can accomplish.

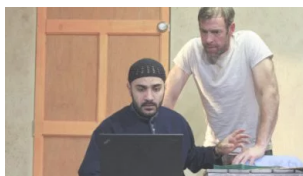
[Arden Theatre Company, 40 N. Second Street] **April 6-June 12, 2016; ardentheatre.org.**

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THE DANGEROUS HOUSE OF PRETTY MBANE (InterAct): 60-second review

January 22, 2015 - Nicholas Ryan



Jen Silverman's DANGEROUS HOUSE OF PRETTY MBANE is a thrilling, thought-provoking, wonderfully heart-wrenching play, now receiving its world premiere by InterAct Theatre Company. A young South African soccer student, Noxolo (flawlessly portrayed by Aimé Kelly), flees to England to escape the harsh consequences in her home country for her sexuality. But when her lover, Pretty Mbane (played with serious spunk by Lynette Freeman), causes commotion in the country and goes missing, Noxolo is forced to go back to South Africa to face the challenges she once ran from.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh's on-point direction keeps the pace moving while still telling the full story, with help from stellar designs by Carolyn Mraz (set), Maria Shaplin (lighting), Katherine Fritz (costume), and Dan Perelstein (sound). The cast members in the ensemble are so real, raw, and vulnerable, it truly stings when they want it to hurt. THE DANGEROUS HOUSE OF PRETTY MBANE is an exhilarating theatrical 90-minute marathon—it knocks you over with raw emotion. It is the perfect combination of adrenaline, action, laughter, and most importantly—heart. [Main Stage, Adrienne Theatre, 2030 Sansom St.] **January 16-February 8, 2015; interacttheatre.org.**

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- Read Julius Ferraro's full-length review of THE DANGEROUS HOUSE OF PRETTY MBANE.

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TIL DIVORCE DO US PART: THE MUSICAL (Society Hill Playhouse): The annoying ex you never wanted to see

November 18, 2014 - Nicholas Ryan



jamesjackson@raveneyes

The curtain speech at the Society Hill Playhouse's TIL DIVORCE DO US PART leads the audience to believe we are about to witness a musical filled with laughter and heart about one of the most heart-wrenching subjects in America. Unfortunately, this 90-minute cabaret featuring of three bitter divorced women and an annoying newspaper pen pal crams heartless bubble gum jingles and cheap laughs into the plot of a confused Lifetime special.

We are introduced to Dottie (Trevor Cahill), a writer of a newspaper column for divorced women who has been answering letters since the paper debuted. However, this Dottie is actually a young man who has taken over for his family member, the original. The letters introduce each musical number with different scenarios; all of which contain three women singing about their recent divorce, typically losing their man for another woman.

With no set, and hardly any costumes, the actors should be able to propel this piece forward, but most of them fall flat. Trevor Cahill disappoints with a wooden and tone-deaf performance as Dottie, the role with the most potential. Of the three women, Cassandra Nary and Michelle Pauls give bubbly portrayals that border on headache-inducing. Donna Dougherty is perhaps the saving grace of the show—a much needed burst of energy and heart, with performances that make everyone in the house smile from ear to ear.

Dann Dunn's direction and choreography is vague—it seems as though the actors do anything they want on stage. Staging and audience interaction are messy to watch and I am sure cleanup is awful at the end of the show as drinks are spilling due to clumsy actors knocking into audience members' tables.

The score (John Thomas Fischer) and lyrics (Ruthe Ponturo) are repetitive, cartoonish, and passionless. This one-act songbook could easily be condensed into a three-minute medley and send exactly the same message. Still, pianist Thomas Fosnocht does a brilliant job of being a part of the action; he is one of the more entertaining personalities of the evening.

I was watching the show quoting one of the show's song titles: "If only you were gay", hoping it would shift gears and make me happy with comedy and a toe-tapping score. Unfortunately, TIL DIVORCE DO US PART turns out to be less fun than running into your ex on an elevator. [Society Hill Playhouse, 507 South 8 St.] **October 15-December 7, 2014**; societyhillplayhouse.org

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