

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT BY IRV RIKON

PLAY REVIEW: TOM STOPPARD'S "ARCADIA" AT PALM BEACH DRAMAWORKS

I was really looking forward to seeing Tom Stoppard's "Arcadia," which is now to be viewed at PALM BEACH DRAMAWORKS in downtown West Palm Beach. Sir Stoppard (he has been knighted) is by consensus considered to be one of the very best contemporary English-speaking playwrights, and many regard "Arcadia" as his masterwork. It won England's Olivier Award in 1993 for Best New Play, the Tony Award for Best Play in 1995 and the Tony Award again in 2011 for Best Revival of A Play. Some call this the greatest theatrical work written in our Age. Others vilify it. If nothing else, "Arcadia" is controversial. And it surely defines Dramaworks' desire to produce "Theater to think about".

Now having seen it, I find "Arcadia" to be neither the best nor the worst. However, it is in scope one of the most ambitious non-musical plays ever written and produced. And before going further, I'll say right here the cast is outstanding.

The play is set in "A room on the garden front of a large country house in Derbyshire, England". But here's where the going starts to get tough: Act 1, Scene 1, takes place April 10, 1809. Scene 2 is the present. Scene 3 is April 11, 1809. Scene 4 is the present. Intermission. Act 2, Scene 1, is the present. Scene 2 is April 12, 1809. Scene 3 is the present and May, 1812. Summarizing the plot as briefly as possible,

In Act One, (1809,) 13-year-old Thomasina Coverly (Caitlin Cohn,) a precocious young genius, is writing notes while trying to prove scientist Fermat's Last Theorem, but she becomes distracted when her tutor, Septimus Hodge, (Ryan Zachary Ward,) a friend of poet Lord Byron, speaks of the sexual dalliances preoccupying several occupants of the estate. Indeed, another poet, Ezra Chater (Cliff Burgess) soon appears and accuses Septimus of having an affair with his wife, Lady Croom (Margery Lowe), who follows shortly. Ezra challenges the tutor to a duel.

At the present time in Act One, author Hannah Jarvis (Vanessa Morosco) who's written a book on hermits, is searching for details of a hermit who once supposedly lived on the estate. Meanwhile, she's exploring the gardens and the Romantic imagination that gave rise to their beauty. Enter literature professor Bernard Nightingale (Peter Simon Hilton) with Chloe Coverly (Arielle Fishman) and Gus Coverly (Casey Butler). At first, Chloe does not reveal Bernard's identity to Hannah, since he panned her last book. When she finds out who he is, Hannah is

furious, but eventually she agrees to share data with him. Valentine, a post-graduate student in mathematical biology is there to study the population of grouse. Chloe, roughly Thomasina's age, discovers Thomasina's notes and is astonished by the latter's brilliance. As for Bernard, he's convinced that Lord Byron (who never appears in the play), long ago killed Ezra Chater in a duel.

If this sounds confusing, and it is, hang in there. Stoppard writes with elegance and wit. Much of the script is funny. All of it is profound. The playwright addresses himself to dichotomous themes even when they're together. Things may appear to contradict each other: Romanticism and Classicism; intuition and logic; science and the arts; thought and feeling; certainty and uncertainty. Yet, they can and do co-exist, paradoxically, in the same time and space. If somehow there be chaos, in the end, order arises out of disorder. And to re-phrase an old cliché, The more things change, the more our natural human curiosity remains the same.

For the marvelous cast members, some of whom I've not mentioned by name, veteran actor Dan Leonard among them, just memorizing the lines is a herculean task, since the playwright might introduce a truly deep concept, then interrupt it with humor, and back again. Those who don't like the play no doubt are troubled for the same reason. It's a challenging work.

Director J. Barry Lewis, Costume Designer Brian O'Keefe and the always reliable technical staff do their jobs wonderfully well. And one of the things that makes the work so pleasurable is the intertwining relationships among the 13 people involved. Watch them! Matters do not always go as one would expect. The play's resolution leaves one (this one, at least), feeling good. I'm so glad I saw it!

"Arcadia" runs through April 30. "The Cripple of Inishmaan" by Martin McDonagh and again directed by J. Barry Lewis, plays May 19 - June 4. Says the publicist, "In this darkly comic play, a handicapped young man seeks to escape the cruelty and bleakness that engulfs him on the desolate island of Inishmaan by participating in a Hollywood film being made nearby." "Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," one of Stephen Sondheim's masterful musicals, begins its run on July 14 with Clive Cholerton directing. For tickets to these and other Dramaworks events, telephone 514-4042. Online:

www.palmbeachdramaworks.org.