

## The Lady Vanishes

River Cities Reader – June 11, 2008 - by Mike Schulz

"Life's full of surprises."

These were among the first words spoken from stage during the opening-night presentation at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre. Yet while this sentiment would've sounded perfectly appropriate coming from one of the characters in the comedic mystery *Catch Me If You Can*, it was actually a statement by the show's director, Kevin DeDecker, who preceded the performance with an announcement: Actor Mike Skiles had fallen ill, and his role as Inspector Levine would be assumed, that evening, by the production's stage manager, Drew Carter - a young man who would be carrying his script in hand, and would also be making his (accidental) stage *debut*.

I routinely enjoy Mike Skiles' performances and certainly hope he's feeling better, but I'll admit feeling rather jazzed by this unexpected turn of events, as I'd worked at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse during a two-month run of *Catch Me If You Can* in 2003, and consequently knew whodunit even before the "it" was revealed by playwrights Jack Weinstock and Willie Gilbert. I also knew, as those unacquainted with the show likely didn't, just how big a deal this actor substitution was; with the exception of the play's lead, no performer carries a heavier load than the one portraying Inspector Levine.

So on behalf of what appeared to be a most cheerful and satisfied audience, allow me to offer Carter hearty congratulations. Not only did he make it through Thursday's presentation with aplomb, but did so with such sweetness, relaxed charm, and sharp comic instinct that I, for one, am already looking forward to his next stage performance, accidental or otherwise; if Carter was at all terrified, he didn't let it show for an instant. One of the great joys of theatre, of course, is that you never know what's going to happen even when you *do* know what's going to happen, and in Richmond Hill's *Catch Me If You Can*, watching Carter create a wholly entertaining figure with no prep time was the second-greatest thrill of the evening.

Before getting to the show's single-greatest thrill, though, allow me to nutshell *Catch Me If You Can*'s opening minutes, which find Al Whitmore's Daniel Corban enlisting the aid of Carter's detective; following a minor spat during their Catskill Mountains honeymoon, Corban's new bride has driven off in her husband's Corvette, and has subsequently gone missing. And that's as much of the plot as I'm willing to divulge, as the production reminded me that audiences new to the piece seem to get as big a charge from its setup as from its resolution. Suffice it to say that Corban's quandary winds up involving a mysterious blonde (Dawn Rena Lang), a priest (Archie Williams), a pair of illicit lovers (Renaud Haymon & Carla Stevens), and an elderly deli owner.

This character is played by Richmond Hill veteran Dave Rash (it's his 49th production in 41 years), and if you're familiar with the actor's work, it shouldn't shock you to learn that *he's* the show's single-greatest thrill. I can't think of one area performer who elicits such extraordinary audience empathy, and whether registering his character's understandable, heavily accented confusion or good-naturedly conversing with the "moose" (actually a deer head) on the wall, the assuredly confident Rash is a rib-tickling hoot; he enjoys acting so much, and is such a clever, genial comedian, that the crowd actually grew a little hostile at his eventual treatment. (Let's just say the character shows up with brunch, and ends up on the receiving end of a most unwanted tip.)

The others weren't quite at Rash's level - which is, admittedly, a really high level - but Lang had some snappy, entertainingly mean-spirited moments, Williams came through with a sensational burst of threatening anger, and Haymon, after nearly stealing the show with his one-scene turn in February's *Light Up the Sky*, came close to doing so again here. Only Whitmore seemed truly uncomfortable, as his Corban, who needs to be in an almost constant tizzy, didn't seem very invested in his wife's disappearance, and the actor stumbled over too many lines to develop a consistent rhythm.

Yet DeDecker kept things moving at a sprightly pace, and while I'm not the best one to judge just how well *Catch Me If You Can*'s central mystery played for the uninitiated, I wasn't aware of any moment when the audience didn't appear fully invested in the goings-on; the punchlines got their

laughs (with an added, juicy one involving Rod Blagojevich even getting *applause*), the gunshots (oops - spoiler alert) earned their jumps, and the excited, expectant buzz in the air felt genuine.

Maybe people were merely waiting for something untoward to happen during Carter's scenes, but absolutely nothing did, and his presence added a sizable kick to Weinstock's and Gilbert's modestly witty, somewhat stale contraption. I read in DeDecker's director's notes that Carter is new to Richmond Hill, and with just one show he's turned out to be not only valuable, but on Thursday, positively *invaluable*. Life's full of surprises, indeed.

## **Catch' fetches laughs despite a few holes**

**Quad City Times – June 11, 2008 - by David Burke**

Maybe it was the curve ball of a Rod Blagojevich punchline at the opening night of Richmond Hill Players' "Catch Me If You Can" in Geneseo, Ill., that got me thinking about Drew Peterson. Like the erstwhile suburban Chicago cop, Daniel Corban's (Al Whitmore) wife is missing. Like Peterson, he feels the finger of suspicion pointing at him.

But unlike Peterson, Corban's wife waltzes back into his life.

Granted, the woman (Dawn Rena Lang) doesn't look like his wife, but she knows every detail of their two-week-old marriage. With physical and mental threats, she's keeping him nearly hostage in the Catskills lodge where they're honeymooning.

"Catch Me If You Can" is billed as a comedy-mystery, and unlike the 2003 version performed by Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse in Rock Island, relies on the former more than the latter.

Much of that is thanks to two performers on the far reaches of the experience spectrum. Dave Rash steals his scene as a sandwich shop owner, complete with a credible Yiddish accent and great comedic timing. The Geneseo veterinarian gets special kudos in the program for 49 performances in the theater's 40 years. Legend has it that he milked cows in the Richmond Hill barn long before it was a theater.

The other laudable performance comes from stage manager Drew Carter, who had to step in as the detective (a meaty role in the show) days earlier after health problems sidelined the originally cast actor. With script in hand and supposedly no experience on stage, Carter showed promising comedic timing, even garnering laughs in his first 10 seconds on stage.

Lang also shows potential in the role of the wife, alternating honeymoon sweetness around guests with vitriol toward her husband when they're alone.

On stage most of the night, Whitmore has too rumpled of a look to believably play the auto advertising exec we're supposed to believe he's playing — but shows the angst of the character well.

Archie Williams is creepy, whether he wants to be or not, in the role of a priest, and Renaud Haymon and Carla Stevens make a nice last-minute appearance as Corban's boss and boss' wife.

Although it is played primarily for laughs, director Kevin DeDecker and his cast build up some nice, tense dramatic moments as well. The up-close, in-the-round atmosphere at the barn made a handgun prop, integral in one scene and kicked aside in another, more noticeable than it would be on a proscenium stage.

The Blagojevich punchline (as well as one using Dr. Phil) pointed out some snags in the space-time continuum that easily could have been corrected. The 1965 script includes some J. Edgar Hoover references, but also has a line that proclaims, "This is the computer age!"

By keeping the show set in a more ambiguous time, the Richmond Hill production would have been more of a show to catch.

## Catch This If You Want

RubyNancy.com - June 11, 2008 - by Ruby Nancy

Let me start this review by giving a basic disclaimer. I'm not a huge fan of the whodunit, and it's a rare set of twists and turns that can really hold my attention. Even rarer is a production of this kind of script that is well put together enough to overcome my sincere lack of affection for the genre.

Unfortunately, the show currently playing at Richmond Hill is not such a show.

The material, an oldie by Jack Weinstock and Willie Gilbert, is reasonably clever, featuring a premise that isn't as flimsy or predictable as many such scripts are. But the production itself has a huge flat expanse that covers a good portion of Act One, and the lively performances that spice up the second act come too late to save the show.

Al Whitmore plays Daniel Corban, a big shot in luxury auto marketing, who has been honeymooning in a Catskills summer house. Whitmore couldn't come across less like a slick marketing exec, and he lends the character a dense and folksy affability that totally does not work for the role. His Daniel is dim enough to be fooled by the many lies he hears throughout the show, though the role is written as though Daniel does pick up on much of what is going on. The resulting disconnect is enough to skew the entire production.

Here's how the rest of the scenario in CATCH ME IF YOU CAN goes: Corban's wife has been missing for several days, and a representative of local law enforcement, Inspector Levine (Drew Carter, a last-minute replacement in the role), has been called in to find the missing newlywed. A Father Kelleher and a young woman claiming to be Mrs. Corban show up, and the Daniel character has never seen either of them before.

Though the night I attended opening weekend included an appearance by Carter, whose work that evening was his third time on stage – ever – and had him referring to a script in hand, this character was at least as sharp as Whitmore's, and often seemed to be the better performance.

Altogether, the first act goes on for quite some time – a huge part of why the show seems much longer than two hours – but the appearance of additional characters after intermission perks things up quite a bit.

RHP veteran Dave Rash steps onto the stage in the first seconds of Act Two, carrying a take-away box of deli sandwiches (and, inexplicably, three cups of coffee in a "brunch for two"), and he earns laughs and applause before he ever speaks an entire line. What Rash really does here, as Sidney, the ancient owner of a delicatessen, is take the entire show, tuck it into the pocket of his old-fashioned windbreaker, and walk off with it – and that's all before anyone else joins him on the stage for the rest of that scene.

Renaud Haymon and Carla Stevens (as Corban's boss and the boss' ladyfriend) also bound onto the stage in the second half, and these two experienced performers – like Rash in his scene – are a breath of fresh air that comes too late to rescue the whole production. Haymon and Stevens seem to be having a total blast, and their fun moments pass way too quickly.

Without Rash and the other late arrivals, there is little about this show to deserve a positive recommendation, but audiences who are happy with a middling-to-mediocre whodunit -- and anyone who will willingly sit through anything to see Rash – are most likely to enjoy this CATCH ME IF YOU CAN.

The rest of you might not want to bother with the chase.

## **See comedic whodunit 'Catch Me If You Can' -- or don't**

**Moline Dispatch – June 11, 2008 - by Jeff Dick**

Not to be confused with the 2002 Steven Spielberg movie of the same name, "Catch Me If You Can" the play is a comedic whodunit by Jack Weinstock and Willie Gilbert which originally opened on Broadway in 1965.

The play opens at a Catskills cabin where newlywed Daniel Corban (Al Whitmore) has been waiting three days for his wife's return. A seemingly inept detective, Inspector Levine (Drew Carter), comes to question Corban, and the bumbling nature of his inquiry prompts a dismissive Daniel to compare him to Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich.

Obviously, this line was not in the original play but is a needless revision added in an attempt to "update" the proceedings with a topical remark. The ploy went for a cheap laugh and that's just what it got. However, this throwaway bit came at the expense of credibility. Blagojevich's travails may be well known around here but not where the play is set.

Not long after the detective departs, a local priest, Father Kelleher (Archie Williams), shows up with a question: Would Corban be willing to take his wife back with no questions asked? Then a woman claiming to be his missing wife, Elizabeth (Dawn Rena Lang), strolls in as if she owns the place. Corban claims not to know her.

For the remainder of Act One, much back-and-forth bickering -- some of it faintly amusing -- ensues between Corban, his "wife," the cop, and the priest over who's telling the truth, who's crazy, and whether there's a ruse afoot to bilk Corban out of a potential inheritance.

The proceedings pick up in the second act when Richmond Hill Players veteran (49 performances!) David Rash makes his welcome entrance as a thickly-accented deli-owner-cum-comedian -- and pretty much steals the show with his precise body language and well-timed comic delivery.

As for the honeymooning Corban, Mr. Whitmore doesn't come across as a supposedly wily marketing exec; Ms. Lang works her feminine wiles well enough as the alleged wife; and Mr. Williams cuts an imposing figure with his cunning smile and Yul Brynner pate.

More problematic is Drew Carter, the production stage manager forced at the last minute to take over the cop's role without time to memorize the script. Dividing his gaze between fellow players and his notes, Mr. Carter does a yeoman's job under trying circumstances. But it still looks as if he's doing a read-through -- one that, hopefully, won't be necessary with a few more days to prepare for this weekend's performances.

Even for the lightweight whodunit genre, "Catch Me If You Can" requires too much willing suspension of disbelief. If this "Catch" were a fish, one would be tempted to throw it back.

### **Whitmore cast in 'Catch Me If You Can'**

GENESE0-- Al Whitmore was hoping for a small part in the upcoming Richmond Hill Players production of "Catch Me If You Can."

That didn't happen. He is cast as Daniel Corban, one of the leads in the comedy whodunit. Mr. Whitmore is the advertising man who takes his bride to the boss' mountain lodge on their honeymoon. He calls in the local police to investigate her sudden disappearance, and before long there are several murderous incidents at the isolated lodge.

The Richmond Hill play is a "homecoming" for Mr. Whitmore, who was very active with the Richmond Hill Players in the 1970's and 1980's, but said when he moved from Geneseo to the Quad-Cities, he became involved in other theater groups including Playcrafters, Corn Cob Players, Eclectic Theater Company and Genesisus Guild.

"I have been in plays that range from Shakespeare to Simon to Moliere and some very forgettable playwrights," Mr. Whitmore said. "But it has been a long time since I have done any theater, probably about 12 years, and I was planning on a part that would get me back into theater without being re-initiated by fire."

But since he retired from his job at John Deere Parts Distribution Center in Milan, Mr. Whitmore said he finds he once again has time.

Mr. Whitmore was born and raised in Geneseo, graduating from Geneseo High School in 1973, where he was on the cross country and track teams, speech team, and "a little bit of theater and choir."

He was an All-State Vocalist for two years during his high school days.

His theater experience has ranged from "on stage to backstage to producer. I did one show where I had three different walk-on roles and worked props and two major set changes," he said. "I have portrayed good guys, bad guys, old men, young men, Americans, British and one time the father to an actor who is five years older than me."

He said his favorite role was that of Brindsley Miller in Richmond Hill Players production of "Black Comedy," 22 years ago.

"It was set during a blackout, but the lights were on in the theater so the audience could see what the actors were supposedly dealing with in a blackout," he said.

When asked if he has any interest in directing a show, Mr. Whitmore said, "I have never directed a show and I have no interest in trying it...Maybe 20 years ago, but not now."

What Mr. Whitmore likes about being on stage is the "teamwork...Watching a team come together and perform successfully," he said.

He added, "The most memorable experiences I have are things I have seen, not things I have done. I saw a pair of actors skip from the first to the third act in one line, work their way back to the first act, and after all was said and one, get a standing ovation."