

Silly humor, family warmth in Richmond Hill's 'Escanaba'

Quad-City Times - April 11, 2011 - by David Burke

When your pivotal scene involves waiting on explosive flatulence, with one character's nose buried deep in another's nether regions, you know you're not watching classical theater.

Yet "Escanaba in da Moonlight," a comedy continuing this weekend for the Richmond Hill Players in Geneseo, Ill., is a laugh-yourself-silly funfest with colorful characters, a sense of both the supernatural and the spiritual, and family bonds.

In a deer lodge in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (known as da-you-pee), we find narrator/dad Albert Soedy (John VanDeWoestyne) warning the audience "have I got a buck story for you." He's there with his 43-year-old twin sons, Remnar (Justin Raver) and Reuben (Don Faust). The former has bagged his buck long ago, and the latter still is waiting for his first, almost breaking a generations-old family record.

Veteran actor VanDeWoestyne is in his element as the patriarch, both breaking the fourth wall and conversing with his sons as if he was born to wear the flannel shirt in which he's clad.

Newcomer Raver and longtime actor Faust are nice fits for the brothers, with some sibling-like give and take.

Jonathan Grafft nearly steals the show as Jimmer, a family friend whose intentionally incomprehensible dialogue is boosted by the gusto of his character. Greg Cripple solidly rounds out the cast as a Department of Natural Resources ranger checking on the happenings in the cabin.

Director Gregg Neuleib takes advantage of every humorous moment of the script, which creates some interesting tableaux throughout the night. He also designed the set - usually not a concern for the in-the-round Barn Theatre - which includes about a half-dozen deer heads mounted above the audience.

The script by movie star Jeff Daniels equally makes fun of and salutes his home state's residents.

I'd never paid much attention to Daniels' acting career until he performed at Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse in Rock Island three years ago this month. He's got both a warm and wicked sense of humor, which shows in this script as well as in his singing and songwriting.

A note to wives and girlfriends reading this: If you ever had an inkling to drag a beer-drinkin', hunting-lovin' husband to the theater, this is the one to take them to.

Yooper-Duper: "Escanaba in da Moonlight,"

River Cities Reader - April 10, 2011 - by Thom White

On Thursday night, the cast of the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's *Escanaba in da Moonlight* brought me to a place I'd yet to arrive at in all of the theatre I've seen in the area: I experienced a fit of tear-filled giggles so strong, so overwhelming, that I missed several lines of dialogue.

In his role as Jimmer Negamanee, a simpleton from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Jonathan Grafft adopts a speech impediment that adds a "sh" sound to almost every word. When he enters the play, Jimmer utters the line "My Chevy shook a shih!", setting off an attempt by the other characters to figure out just what he's saying. And when this happened on Thursday, I found myself giggling so hard that I couldn't breathe... just like the woman sitting behind me. It is, truly, one of the funniest scenes I've ever seen on a stage.

Written by Jeff Daniels – yes, *that* Jeff Daniels – *Escanaba* is the story of a deer-hunting family that believes they're cursed, and it isn't laugh-out-loud funny throughout. In fact, following a hilarious attempt to wake Don Faust's character from a paranormal stupor, the second act is fairly serious, as Reuben works to shake the curse and bag his first buck. Still, there are many good laughs in the play – so many, in truth, that it marks the second show in a row that my play-hating partner, Matt, said he liked.

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I attribute much of the production's success to director Gregg Neuleib's relaxed pacing and the impressive combination of lighting designer Jennifer Kingry's and sound designer Larry Lord's effects. (The strobe and flashing lights are often matched to an otherworldly voice that's penetrating, but not overpowering, in volume.) Plus, there's John VanDeWoestyne's strong comedic delivery in *Escanaba's* leading role of Albert Soady, the family patriarch and teller of this tale.

In the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's January production of *Lend Me a Tenor*, VanDeWoestyne captured my attention with the ease with which he portrayed the titular tenor. He eases into *Escanaba's* Albert just as smoothly, if not more so, since his Yooper is so laid back. VanDeWoestyne transitions flawlessly between speaking to the audience in the present and acting out scenes from the past, and seems so natural in the role, with such a believable Yooper accent, that his carefree telling of the tale is readily accepted by the audience, who laughs with him often and hangs on his every word.

Grafft, however, brings down the house, not only with his "My Chevy shook a shih!" scene (the translation for which I won't spoil), but also with Jimmer's morning flatulence and the way it's employed. Faust and Justin Raver are well-paired as brothers Reuben and Remnar Soady; each has apparent trouble suppressing his real-life intelligence to embody the dimwitted Yoopers called for, but their brotherly rivalry is believable. And Greg Cripple, perhaps oddly, seems most in his acting element when his Ranger Tom T. Treado is stripping down to his skivvies while in a God-struck stupor.

(It's to the cast's credit that a sound-effects snafu, on Thursday, didn't come across, completely, as a mistake. At the point in which Grafft's character was supposed to let out his biggest fart yet, the sounds of a ghostly Native American came out instead, followed by what seemed like every sound effect already heard up to that point in the show – an obvious attempt, by the tech operator, to find the right cue. Yet happily, instead of standing there bewildered, the actors – at least the ones whose characters were *conscious* – reacted to the incorrect sounds as if they were *supposed* to be heard in that part of the play.)

I had quite a few concerns about seeing an all-male play about deer hunting, which didn't exactly sound like my cup of tea. Neuleib's work surprised me, though, thanks to his and Daniels' sincerity mixed with humor. Here's hoping that *Escanaba in da Moonlight* isn't the last of the author's plays that the Richmond Hill Players choose to stage.

Dem Yoopers is havin' some fun in 'Escanaba'

Moline Dispatch - April 13, 2011 - by Julie Jensen

Did the sold-out house at Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo enjoy "Escanaba in da Moonlight?" You betcha!

The "Yoopers" in a deer camp in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, north of Escanaba, generate one laugh after another in the comedy written by Jeff Daniels and directed by Gregg Neuleib.

It's about the Soady family, and primarily son Reuben, who is 43 and has never shot a buck. He's a buckless Yooper, and that's the worst form of lucklessness. He triggers a series of bizarre events.

Things get even weirder with the arrival of Jimmer Negamane from Menominee, a wild-eyed backwoodsman in a coonskin cap who once was abducted by aliens.

Reuben's brother, Remnar, believes that UFOs exist in Yooperland, and there's a chance he's right.

John Van DeWoestyne plays Albert Soady, the father and narrator of this tall tale, with great assurance.

Don Faulst is Reuben, and he takes on the role with passion.

Justin Raver is Remnar Soady, wearing a torn shirt and talking about extraterrestrials.

Jonathan Grafft is Jimmer Negamane, who seems to jibber at first. His expulsion of gas is dramatic, to say the least, and a major element in the plot.

Greg Cripple is Ranger Tom T. Treado, who claims that he sees God and sings "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as he undresses.

Nancy Teerlinck appears briefly as Wolf Moon Dance Soady, Reuben's Indian wife.

VanDeWoestyne explores his world onstage

Moline Dispatch - April 13, 2011 - by Claudia Loucks

Theater is a way of life for John VanDeWoestyne of Geneseo.

Well known to area theatergoers for his talent on stage and as a director, Mr. VanDeWoestyne heads the cast of the Richmond Hill Players' current production, "Escanaba in da Moonlight," his 73rd community-theater production. The slapstick backwoods comedy by Jeff Daniels runs through Sunday in the Barn Theater atop Richmond Hill Park in Geneseo.

Mr. VanDeWoestyne plays the father (and narrator), Albert Soady, in "Escanaba," a show about deer hunters on the eve of Opening Day.

"It's about family, traditions, superstitions, American Indian lore, and men being goofy while cooped up together in a deer camp," he said recently. "It focuses on a father, his two sons and their nutty friend, Jimmer. Most of the comedy comes from the extraordinary nonsense they go through trying to ensure the eldest son doesn't become the oldest Soady on record to have never bagged a buck.

"The show is pure silliness, with ample sight gags and a few outrageous moments of what I like to call 'slob humor.'"

The cast also features Jonathan Grafft, Geneseo; Don Faust, Davenport, Justin Raver, Kewanee, and Greg Cripple, Bettendorf.

Mr. VanDeWoestyne got involved with Richmond Hill in 1982 with encouragement from the late Clyde Walter, who helped found the group in 1968.

"I had shopped in Clyde's men's clothing store but didn't really know him that well," he said. "However, we had mutual friends, and he let it be known through them that he thought I would be good on stage and suggested I audition.

Because the Barn Theater was not "winterized" then, in 1982 the Richmond Hill Players began augmenting their summer season at the Barn with winter dinner-theater productions at the former King's Table Restaurant. Mr. VanDeWoestyne was cast as the hero, Casper Vandenburg, in that first dinner-theater production, the melodrama "No Mother To Guide Her, or More To Be Pitied Than Censured," and said he "never looked back. Clyde became a good friend and mentor. He was a tremendous influence on me."

Once "Escanaba" is over, Mr. VanDeWoestyne will be featured as Caiaphas this summer in "Jesus Christ Superstar" at Harrison Hilltop Theater, Davenport.

In addition to Richmond Hill productions, he has appeared in shows with Playcrafters -- most recently as Tito Merelli in the January production of "Lend Me a Tenor" -- Clinton Area Showboat Theater, Blackhawk Players and Quad City Music Guild. Overall, he has acted in 45 shows, directed 19 and been stage manager or tech director for nine others.

His "favorite role all time is the villainous Chauvelin in Quad City Music Guild's production of 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' in 2002," he said, "because it was a spectacular, lavish production with an outstanding cast and staff, and the villain always gets the best music and dialog. I even had a thrilling sword fight with another Geneseo actor and friend, Bryan Tank, who played the title role."

He listed his "sentimental favorite" as Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," also at Music Guild, "because it had been a dream role for 30 years, and also because my wife, Judy VanDeWoestyne, and two daughters, Emily and Sarah, were directly involved in the production."

His favorites with Richmond Hill include Charlie in "The Foreigner" and Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Mr. VanDeWoestyne said he's fortunate to live here. "There can't be another metropolitan area of 400,000 anywhere in this country that has so much quality year-round theater available to the masses as we have in the Quad-City metro area. All of us do not hit home runs every time out of the box, but many productions staged in the Quad-Cities could easily play on stages in Chicago and elsewhere.

"It's a testament to the talent and creativity of all involved," he said. "I'm humbled to be just a very small part of that fraternity, and feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to know and work with many of these folks." But one of them, he said, is missing.

"The Geneseo community, Richmond Hill and I lost a cherished friend with the passing of Dr. David Rash. Dave was an integral part of RHP for 43 years. His impact on our group and the entire community cannot be overstated. The laughter, joy, passion and integrity he brought to every project are what community theater is all about. We mourn him, loved him and will miss him dearly."

Mr. VanDeWoestyne recently retired after 34 years with the City of Geneseo, serving as street superintendent and public-services superintendent for the last 22 years. That leaves ... well, more time for theater.

"Theater is not an enjoyment for me as much as it is a way of life," he said. "I think all of us have something deep inside us, often in a secret place, that makes us whole. For me, with the exception of hearing my children's laughter, I'm never happier than when I'm on stage, crawling around in someone else's skin for a couple hours. The bond between actor and audience is precious. Let's take a journey together and see where it goes."