

## 'Laughing Stock' is perfect parody for Richmond Hill

Quad-City Times - April 21, 2009 - David Burke

When theater artistic director Gordon Page (played by Don Hazen) shows actor Jack Morris (Alex Klimkewicz) around during the opening scenes of "Laughing Stock," there definitely are some hints of familiarity.

"It's a barn," Hazen's Page repeatedly tells the young actor. Oh, and by the way, it smells of maple leaves.

That makes it a perfect fit for Geneseo, Ill., and its Richmond Hill Players, who have done their shows in a former barn for more than four decades.

Charles Morey's comedy, set in a New England professional summer stock theater, is a fine fit for Richmond Hill in many other ways as director John VanDeWoestyne tailors the roles to the talents of a multigenerational cast.

The comedy follows the company through its summer repertory season of "Dracula," "Charley's Aunt" and "Hamlet," with perspectives from being onstage, behind the scenes and using the audience's imagination.

Hazen, the leader of the 14-person ensemble, continues the gentle humanity he's shown in several roles with area companies, including exchanges with the company's sarcastic stage manager (nicely played by Suzanne Rakestraw), with whom his character has a past.

The rest of the company includes the seen-it-all theater veterans (the charming David Rash and Lynn Monge); the lothario who's playing Dracula (Nicholas Waldbusser, in a performance that owes more than a little to Jimmy Fallon) hitting on the ingenue (Erin Williams, in an impressive debut); the Yale-educated free spirit (the always-enjoyable Molly McLaughlin); the jaded working-man actor (Bill Hudson) and Klimkewicz as an actor who is thisclose to switching careers and heading to law school.

Among the non-actor characters is Tom Morrow as the company's business manager, who hilariously delivers anal-retentive speeches about office supplies and why actors shouldn't be pilfering them.

Much of the show is taken up with a Murphy's Law production of "Dracula," including a visual effect by VanDeWoestyne, Chris White and Bill Giebel that's too good to divulge here.

The final scene nicely captures the end of a long summer season, filled with the melancholy and eventual camaraderie of a company parting ways.

Richmond Hill has an affinity for shows about theater and theater folk, and just when you think some of the jargon and references might be a little too inside baseball for others to understand, strong laughter from the audience convinces you otherwise.

Some of the scenes may be a little overwrought and too lengthy, but with some nice touches that play well in the real barn's in-the-round setting, "Stock" will leave theater and non-theater types alike laughing

## The Vampire, the Dane, and the Guy in the Dress

River Cities Reader - April 20, 2009 - by Mike Schulz

As with a person, sometimes you can fall immediately, madly, irrationally in love with a play. And I think I fell in love with author Charles Morey's *Laughing Stock* within its first two minutes, when artistic director Gordon Page (Don Hazen) introduced visiting actor Jack Morris (Alex Klimkewicz) to his venerated theatre in New Hampshire, and the young man took a moment to assess his surroundings before saying, incredulously, "It's a *barn*."

Yes, it was, and yes, it *is*. Currently being staged at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, *Laughing Stock* is a sweet-natured, occasionally farcical comedy about a summer company struggling to stage a repertory season without sufficient time, funds, or talent, and personally, I found its title a bit misleading - *Laughing 'Til You Cry Stock*, I thought, would've been much more appropriate.

I should add, however, that I might be in the minority on this one. Beginning with that opening meta-gag, director John VanDeWoestyne's production is almost absurdly chockablock with verbal, visual, inside, and *way*-inside theatre jokes, so many that the show almost has no choice but to alienate a sizeable

portion of its audience; unless you instinctively understand why a summer theatre's decision to stage Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is a howler for the ages, you'll likely miss out on a bunch of Morey's most inspired bits. (Either that, or you'll be put off by them; at Thursday's opening-night performance, I was one of only a very few who roared when a veteran actor bemoaned companies that were only interested in producing "Nonsense 5 and that *Plaid* thing.")

Yet if you've spent any time at all in a theatre, even as a patron, it would seem nearly impossible not to be charmed by Morey's alternately satirical and sentimental view of backstage life. A familiarity with the terrain will help, of course, as will familiarity with *Dracula*, *Hamlet*, and *Charley's Aunt*, the three shows that *Laughing Stock's* ensemble winds up wrestling with. But you don't need an M.F.A. to cackle when a pretentious director, here, opts to stage *Charley's Aunt* for psychological realism, or wince when an elderly actor keeps forgetting his lines (for understandable reason), or smile when a surprisingly poignant *Hamlet* reminds its participants that the play *is* the thing; Morey, the longtime artistic director of Salt Lake City's Pioneer Theatre Company, may be preaching to the choir, but for most of its 150-minute length, he delivers an exceptionally robust and entertaining sermon.

So does VanDeWoestyne. *Laughing Stock* features a goodly share of joyous, knockabout slapstick, and the scene in which three acting interns (Cory Holbrook, Lisa Pilgrim, and Greg O'Neill) attempt to navigate a ladder through a door, in particular, is a miracle of unforced hilarity. Yet here's nothing artificial about these slaphappy moments; VanDeWoestyne always ensures that the comic mayhem springs from *character*. When Page's self-written, much-abbreviated *Dracula* presentation goes completely off the rails, the actors' and stagehands' attempts to overcome the escalating madness are appropriately harebrained, but the fondness you feel for these somewhat ridiculous theatre "professionals" prevents you from laughing *at* their plight. Like Morey, VanDeWoestyne clearly loves these hapless, hard-working souls. You feel his affection for them in the comfortable, relaxed staging of the company's initial meet-and-greet, and the beautiful quiet of Act I's fade-out, and the climactic farewell to the troops, but it's also there in the expansive delight his actors take in the frequently explosive silliness.

As the company manager with an obsessive hold on his office supplies, Tom Morrow somehow manages to appear utterly simultaneously level-headed and completely out of his mind; his introductory speech ("I'm a *man!* I have *pencils!*") left me giggling until my stomach hurt. Molly McLaughlin is powerfully funny as a deadpan director with mind-boggling improvisational techniques. ("You're a wildebeest!") And Nicholas Waldbusser, delivering eccentrically forceful readings that defy predictability, is riotous as an egocentric actor who refuses to be upstaged by *Dracula's* minimalist set design; his ideas on how the vampire can sneak up on Jonathan Harker unseen - employing the use of spare change and eye drops - lead to an absolutely hysterical throwaway gag.

Yet *Laughing Stock* is unusual in that each of its 14 roles has been three-dimensionally conceived; even the interns, who don't have as much stage time as you might want, exude ingratiating comic presence. Klimkewicz, his character perpetually dazed and amused by the goings-on, provides a series of marvelously deadpan asides, there are cheerful - and sometimes cheerfully *hostile* - contributions by Suzanne Rakestraw, Erin Williams, Bill Hudson, Renaud Haymon, Lynn Monge, and the priceless Richmond Hill veteran David Rash (in his 50th role at the theatre), and Don Hazen is an exceptionally smooth and gracious ringleader, and oftentimes a more slippery eel than his protagonist role might suggest. (Initially planning a production of *King Lear*, Page tries to convince a wealthy sponsor to donate money by insisting that the Bard's tragic play is "very uplifting.")

Neither *Laughing Stock's* opening-night performance nor *Laughing Stock* itself was flawless. On Thursday, several actors still seemed shaky with their lines and cues - and, despite the play's intentionally amateurish bent, not on *purpose* - and there was one truly bizarre bit of staging, when cast members choreographed some *Charley's Aunt* slapstick involving a tea set and demonstrated it while standing in a circle, so that you couldn't view the routine no matter *where* in the Barn you sat. (This might've made sense if the bit was reproduced later in the show, but it wasn't.)

Morey's script, meanwhile, features one truly glaring problem: We never quite know whether or not *Laughing Stock's* theatre troupe is meant to be, you know, *talented*. The hideous *Dracula* blunders and Page's delusions of grandeur (*Peer Gynt*!?) would seem to suggest that the company is ridiculously inept and overreaching, but then they produce what we're told is a completely captivating *Hamlet* (even though the actors' readings don't sound noticeably stronger than they did in the *Dracula* scenes). The

author seems to want it both ways here, setting up the company's members to look foolish only to surprise us with how *not*-foolish they are, but the joke, if it *is* one, doesn't play.

But in a show that provides so much pleasure - even the overly sentimental detours are hearteningly earnest - this is mere quibbling. And even if it wasn't, Richmond Hill's latest still offers the sorts of magnificently funny moments that can keep you chuckling for *months*; I wouldn't dream of giving away the joke involving the Count's winged trajectory from one side of the stage to the other, but suffice it to say that I may never view the use of a theatre's fly system in quite the same way. (Bravas to technical director Jennifer Kingry and scenic designer Angela Rathman for the gut-bustingly outrageous *Dracula* environs.) Even at its messiest, *Laughing Stock* is a theatre-lover's nirvana.

## **Review: 'Laughing Stock' offers a barnful of laughs**

**Argus-Dispatch - April 22, 2009 - by Julie Jensen**

"Laughing Stock," the current production in Geneseo's Richmond Hill Barn, is about a summer season of plays in the Playhouse, a barn theater in New England. It drew a laugh a minute from a packed house Saturday night.

John VanDeWoestyne is the director, and he moves the action along briskly in this comedy by Charles Morey.

The set is bare, becoming backstage, onstage, and an audition site in New York City with the addition of chairs, a table, a bed, and boxes.

The play opens with a flashlight piercing the darkness as Gordon Page (Don Hazen), director of the Playhouse, shows the barn to Jack Morris (Alex Klimkewicz), an actor who plans to audition for the summer season. It's February and very cold, but Jack decides to have a go at it.

The next scene is May in New York City, where auditions are being held for "Dracula, Prince of the Undead," "Charley's Aunt" and "Hamlet."

The large cast includes Tom Morrow as the company's manager, Craig Conlin. He carries on about the actors using too many pencils.

Lynn Monge is Daisy Coates, the companion of Richard Hawksley, the forgetful actor who has performed with all the greats. He's played by Dr. David Rash.

Nicholas Charles Waldbusser is Tyler Taylor, who is cast as Dracula. He's a real fiend, sinking his fangs into the neck of Mary Pierce (Erin Williams), an eager young actress trying to show more emotion in her work.

Molly McLaughlin is Susannah Huntsmen, the director just out of graduate school who has pretentious ideas that stretch the actors' limits.

Suzanne Rakestraw is Sarah McKay, the stage manager, who tries desperately to keep things on the rails. In due course, we learn of her connection to the director. She makes an unexpected entrance to retrieve a tangled bat prop.

Bill Hudson is Vernon Volker, an older actor who isn't thrilled with his roles but is glad to have a job.

Renaud Haymon is Henry Mills, the designer who has to create sets for three plays in a few weeks with no money.

Three apprentices round out the cast: Lisa Pilgrim as Karma Schneider, Cory Holbrook as Ian Milliken, and Greg O'Neill as Braun Oakes, who can never get anyone to pronounce his name correctly.

Some wild scenes include Suzanne Huntsman telling the actors to create an African waterhole (they go ape as all kinds of wild animals); the interns trying to get a tall ladder through a door horizontally; and Braun Oakes entering to say "Tea is served" -- in the wrong play. Jack Morris manages a feminine voice to go with his blonde curls as Charley's Aunt.

And then there's the skull of Ethel, who specified in her will that she wanted it used in "Hamlet" as the skull of Yorick because she always wanted to be in that play. When they discover it's lost, the actors come up with a cunning replacement.

## **For Don Hazen, a wrong turn and -- enter, stage left**

**Dispatch-Argus - April 16, 2009 – by Claudia Loucks**

GENESEO -- A wrong turn while walking the streets of London entirely changed the direction of Don Hazen's life.

Mr. Hazen, Moline, is cast as Gordon Page, the lead character in the Richmond Hill Players' production of "Laughing Stock," which opens tonight. The comedy by Charles Morey is described as a hilarious backstage farce and a genuinely affectionate look into the world of theater.

Mr. Hazen said he loves playing the story and his character, Gordon.

"I like bigger parts because I love to spread my wings and discover new facets of acting, and I especially like having the lead in a large ensemble, as is this one," he said.

He said he carried the dream of acting on stage for a long time but never really considered making it a reality. He worked for freight businesses in the Quad-Cities for more than 30 years until retiring in 2006.

As a retirement/birthday gift, his two grown sons presented him with a trip to Paris and London.

While in London, he was looking for the British Museum when he asked directions from an impeccably dressed and neatly bearded man on a street corner. The man didn't know where to send Mr. Hazen but said he was waiting for his producer, who would know the way.

"We started off with some small talk ... and then this man, with a most impressively deep and magnificent baritone voice, proceeded to imitate several famous actors," including Sir Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole, Mr. Hazen said.

It turned out the man was Tony Clarkin, a successful Irish stage, film and voice-over actor who recently had appeared with Julia Roberts and helped coach her Irish accent.

When the producer arrived, the two men parted, but not before the man asked Mr. Hazen if he ever thought of becoming an actor. "I replied, 'Well, not as reality,'" and he countered with, 'You should, you have a magnificent voice and you have a real presence,'" Mr. Hazen said.

"Time stood still," he said. "I looked up at the London sky and thought to myself, 'Yes, why not now, and if not now, when? What's stopping you?' It was time."

When he returned to the Quad-Cities, he began going to auditions.

He was cast in Richmond Hill's "A Few Good Men" and "Light Up the Sky;" as well as "Altar Call" with the Chicago Theater; "Oh! Oh! Here Comes Christmas," "12 Angry Men" and "The Mousetrap" with Playcrafters; "Once Upon a Mattress" with Quad City Music Guild, and "The Woman in Black" and "The Odd Couple" with Harrison Hilltop.

All told, he has been cast in 10 productions since June 2007 -- all from a chance meeting with a stranger on a London street corner.

"To this day," he said, "I have kept in touch with my friend, Tony Clarkin."