

Promises, Promises

River Cities Reader – February 15, 2010 – by Jill Walsh

The opening scene of Norm Foster's *Wrong for Each Other* at Richmond Hill Barn Theatre had me worried that I was in for a fluffy, surface-level relationship comedy in which a divorced man and woman reunite after reminiscing about the happiest moments of their shared past. Thankfully, *Wrong* delved under that flimsy comedic surface and let viewers in on the arguments and unfortunate familial circumstances that steered the relationship of Rudy Sorenson (Chris White) and Nora Case (Jessica Nicol White) toward an inevitable separation. And while *Wrong* panders with a predictable ending and plenty of witty banter between the real-life newlyweds, the script felt the most natural, the most *right*, when its characters stopped putting so much effort into entertaining the audience, and focused on each other.

At the play's beginning, Nora and Rudy run into each other at a restaurant three years and nine months after their divorce, and after agreeing to share a meal together, progress through a series of brief flashback scenes that include their initial encounter at a plant shop, their first date at a baseball game, and their first kiss, sexual encounter, and argument. Director Craig Michaels' decision to cast the White duo as the endearing house-painter Rudy and the tough-shelled, workaholic Nora was a clever one. The Whites had such organic conversational and physical chemistry during the opening-night performance that, despite their characters' flaws and infidelities, I was always pulling for Rudy and Nora to end up together.

Nicol White's best moments were when she shed her character's reserved nature and allowed her emotions to control her body language. Her portrayal of Nora's rage while she prepares to leave her marriage was especially affecting; the performer's hands were trembling, and the blood rose in her face as she gestured violently and let her dialogue fly.

Meanwhile, White's interpretation of Rudy succeeded best in his quieter moments, and his final monologue was delivered with genuine, soft-spoken tenderness. Throughout most of the play, though, Rudy was a loud and bumbling guy who stutters in the presence of Nora and offers clever one-liners as responses, and while White's comedic timing was usually spot-on, his character seemed too eager for audience laughs. (After a long argument about the meaning of the word "signage," with Rudy saying something to the effect of, "Fine, then, I'm going to go get the *car-age!*", I felt as if I should be straining my ears to hear a rimshot.)

Michaels effectively used the theatre-in-the-round space - a square, in Richmond Hill's case - during the apartment scenes. I was always able to see the actor's expressions, and it felt like they had room to move in the space without being hindered by set pieces. Conversely, when the characters were in the tiny plant shop and sitting in the "bleachers" at the baseball game, I was stuck looking at their backs throughout the duration of both scenes. While I liked the idea of Nicol White and White sitting in the stands with the audience, this would've been better executed if the actors had found seats a few rows up, in the seating section under the theatre's technical booth; more people would've seen them. (And design-wise, it was an interesting choice to paint the plants in the shop white, yet I'm curious to know whether this was made for practical and financial purposes - fresh plants aren't cheap - or merely to symbolize that the scene occurred in the past.)

Foster's *Wrong for Each Other* is a multi-dimensional study of a relationship with unique quirks and universal, relatable qualities. Sure, the script's gender roles - tentative businesswoman meets affable working-class buffoon - were ones that have been portrayed a lot lately (and more crassly) in movies such as *Knocked Up*. But watching this particular couple traverse the rocky terrain toward love and marriage felt pleasantly familiar, rather than tedious.

Married actors make 'Wrong' just right.

Quad City Times – February 16, 2010 – by David Burke

Talk about putting pressure on your friendly neighborhood theater critic: Even suggesting that the two performers in the Richmond Hill Players' "Wrong For Each Other" lack chemistry could not only sink a show, but also a marriage.

Fortunately, Chris White and Jessica Nicol White — real-life newlyweds for 3 1/2 months — do have the right chemistry for the romantic comedy, making for an enjoyable night at the theater.

The script finds the two as former flames reunited during lunch at a restaurant, three years and nine months after they've broken up. Written by Canadian playwright Norm Foster, it's a combination of Neil Simon, Nora Ephron (a few lines sound like they came out of "When Harry Met Sally ...") and "Seinfeld" (there's an amusing non sequitur about the use of the word "signage").

The unplanned reunion of housepainter Rudy (White) and arena manager Nora (Nicol White) sets the framework for flashbacks to their first meeting, first date and various other "firsts" in their relationship.

The Whites, director Craig Michaels and technical director Jennifer Kingry seamlessly transition from the present to past with the help of an onstage "waiter" played by Nathan Johnson. Staging their first date at a baseball game in the Barn Theatre's seats is also a nice touch, a prime example of using every bit of the venue's space.

Although there is a light romantic-comedy breeze through the first act, the second act takes a serious turn that is — for reasons unknown — telegraphed with a voiceover after intermission, which leads to the conflict and eventual breakup, with a glimmer of hope for the couple at the conclusion.

Both veteran actors in various Quad-City companies, the newlyweds have the depth and breadth of talent to pull off the material.

It's a funny and occasionally poignant post-Valentine's treat.

Acting couple is right for 'Wrong for Each Other'

Dispatch-Argus – February 17, 2010 – by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Wrong for Each Other," a romantic comedy by Norm Foster, is perfectly paced by its cast of two.

Director Craig Michaels should have some credit for that, too, but the actors, Jessica Nicol White and Chris White, are newlyweds in real life, and their empathy makes them anything **but** wrong for each other.

This is the story of a divorced couple who rehash their relationship and slowly come to realize that perhaps they shouldn't have split up. The question is should they have married in the first place?

The playwright is Canadian, and his plays are that country's most-produced body of work. Perhaps not coincidentally, director Craig Michaels is also Canadian; he began his career hosting a music-television show in Canada in 1978, and first appeared at Richmond Hill in "Rumors" in 2002.

The single set, constructed by Mike Skiles, creates space for a restaurant, a plant shop, a baseball park, apartments and a dressing room.

Rudy Sorenson is a macho house painter, and Nora Case is a meticulous business manager. They meet, seemingly by chance, in a restaurant four years after their divorce, and the action shifts back and forth in time as they reminisce about their relationship.

They meet in a plant shop, where he says he is buying one for his mother. He lies a lot, however. They show up at a ball game, where he yells at everybody and she wishes she were somewhere else.

They kiss on a rollercoaster in the amusement park, the illusion created by a bar they both grasp, both screaming as they exit.

Some of the lines are hilarious. Rudy says, "The last thing I want to do is wake up a woman I'm making love to."

Nora's father threw a dumpling at Rudy when he had dinner with them. The father plays in the symphony with Norvil, a bassoon player Nora is involved with. He's much older than she is.

Knowing that Rudy lies, Nora asks, "Is there a woman in your life?" When he says, "No," she says, "What is her name?" His reply is "Susan."

Nora is brooding in a dressing room the day of their wedding. Rudy asks if she is happy, and she says, "No, more content than happy."

Before the show ends, Nora goes into deep depression, but the final scene indicates there's hope for this star-crossed couple.

One should mention the "wait staff" -- a single attendant who unobtrusively tends to the restaurant table and carries other items offstage. He's played by Nathan Johnson.

In the curtain call, Chris White picks up his wife and swings her around exuberantly.

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River Cities Reader – February 2, 2010 – by Mike Schulz

On February 11, Geneseo's Richmond Hill Barn Theatre opens its 43rd season with Wrong for Each Other, playwright Norm Foster's two-character comedy about a reunion between a long-estranged divorced couple. If, however, that seems an ill-fitting title to open over Valentine's Day weekend, know that the production's stars wound up receiving far more of a Happily Ever After ending than their characters did, as area actors Chris White and Jessica Nicol (White) were married this past Halloween.

Theatregoers are likely familiar with Chris through his performances as Randall McMurphy in the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, the sexually conflicted Brick in Richmond Hill's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and the filicidal businessman in last summer's Phoenix Theatre Company staging of Bash. (This October, he'll make his directorial debut with Richmond Hill's The Shape of Things.) Jessica, meanwhile, took on dramatic challenges in two Pulitzer Prize-winners for Richmond Hill - portraying the tormented math genius Catherine in Proof and the grieving mother Becca in Rabbit Hole - and assumed a more lighthearted role in Playcrafters' production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Crimes of the Heart.

Yet since 2004, when Chris and Jessica co-starred in a presentation by the local interactive-comedy troupe It's a Mystery!, this off-stage couple has also been a frequent on-stage one: For Playcrafters, they were bantering pals in 2005's The Nerd, and for Richmond Hill, they were husband and wife in 2007's King o' the Moon, flirtatious scholars in 2007's Arcadia, and (in two separate vignettes) tentative lovers and contentious spouses in 2009's Almost, Maine.

Over a recent lunch, the pair sat down to discuss their history, their past roles, and their new show. And guess what? The ease and chemistry they share on-stage is even more clearly evident off-

Early Collaborations

Jessica: We met doing murder mysteries. We did two or three together. Maybe more than that.

Chris: The first murder mystery I ever did was with her. We actually played brother and sister in that show. Herbert and Holly. They were performance artists.

Jessica: But *The Nerd* was great, because we all spent a lot of time together. Nobody really wanted to go home.

Chris: We'd all sit out in the parking lot 'til, like, 3 o'clock in the morning almost every single rehearsal.

Jessica: And just *talk*. It was nice out, so you'd just sit outside and smoke and talk and get to know each other ...

Chris: *The Nerd* is where everything really started as far as the deepening friendship, which eventually turned into a *whole* lot more.

Getting Together

Jessica: I think we both felt the chemistry. There was definitely something there. But there was a lot holding us back.

Chris: At that point in time, it wasn't the most I don't know how to phrase this It wasn't the best thing, being that I was married and she was dating somebody.

Jessica: I had been with somebody for quite a long time. But even after my relationship broke up and his marriage ended, I still drug my feet. I was pretty sure that if I got into a relationship with this guy, that'd be *it* for me, you know? I'd be *done*. I didn't want to date anybody else, but I just wasn't sure I wanted to jump in feet first again.

Chris: Our first date was classified as a "non-date."

Jessica: "You know, this isn't a date. We're going out to dinner and a movie as *friends*."

Chris: I came and picked her up for dinner, and I paid, and we went to the movie and all that stuff, but it was a "non-date." Period. To this day, I *still* give her shit about that.

Jessica: Yeah, I'm kind of a weirdo.

Showmances

Chris: Obviously, it depends on the person you're working with and the subject matter you're working on. But no matter what you're doing, you have to create a bond. Whether you're playing romantic leads or you're at each other's throats or whatever, there has to be a chemistry there. So theatre's kind of a breeding ground for something like that [romance] to spring up.

Jessica: He's the first actor that I'd ever dated. I think there was a part of me that didn't want to *share* that. I didn't want to date somebody who also did theatre. But I ended up thinking, "Why *not*?" I mean, you have so much in common, and there's no fighting about "Oh, I've got to do this show and kiss somebody else"

Chris: Although the first time *that* came up, there was resistance. She was doing *Proof* and there's a kissing scene, and I'll be straight up: I was like, "I don't know that I *like* that" But then I wound up doing *Cuckoo's Nest* at the same time, and McMurphy has to kiss one of the hookers, and I was like, "Okay, well, I guess now I can't be shitty about this"

Jessica: Right?

Chris: Once you realize how little emotion there is to it You know, you're just a person up there pretending to be a person, and that person you're pretending to be has to kiss. So it's not an issue.

Fighting on Stage

Chris: Doing *Almost, Maine* was weird because we don't really fight. We have *arguments*, but we don't fight. And so to have a full-blown fight was a little awkward, because it was like, "I don't want you to think that *I* feel this way, because I don't. But for the show, I have to have this attitude with you." We had to learn how to make the characters' relationship vastly different from ours, and how to make the characters fight without hurting each other's feelings in the process.

Jessica: I think what kills you is when you look at the other person on stage and their face They just look so *sad*. And it's like, "Oh, I can't feel bad for you, I'm doing this because I don't *like* you, but look at your *face!*" That's where it gets hard.

Chris: The show was really fun to do, and that scene specifically.

Jessica: Yeah, I think the two scenes with you were probably my favorites as an actor. Because the one character was so bubbly and goofy, and the other kind of fits into ... you know ... what I *do*.

Chris: Oh, so *that's* how we avoid having fights. You just do depressing shows.

Jessica: I get cast in those roles, and I can get it all out.

Wrong for Each Other

Chris: Nora and Rudy are the two characters. They happen to meet at a restaurant three years and nine months after their divorce. So they have an awkward initial meeting, and then they start to flash back to the different "firsts" in their life. We're sitting at a table, and then we get up and show how they first met, and then it goes back to the restaurant, and then we get up and act their first date And it just continues, showing their relationship from beginning to end.

Jessica: There are more funny moments than there are sad - it's most certainly a romantic comedy. And we weren't going to do it unless we *loved* it, just because we've been so busy. But Craig [Michaels, the show's director] gave us the script, and we read it, and we went, "Oh, now we kinda *really* want to audition ... !"

Chris: I believe my exact response was, "God damn it, I didn't want to do anything other than direct my show this year!"

Jessica: But it's great. There are no scene changes - there's only one blackout, other than intermission - and everything kind of bleeds together I don't know much about [playwright] Norm Foster, other than he's Canadian, and Craig's trying to get him to come down and see the show.

Chris: Yeah, no pressure there.

Jessica: No worries.

Favorite Performances

Jessica: We like working together, but I think we also really like working separately. It's nice to be able to go to rehearsals together, but it's also nice to have someone to come home to and talk about your show with.

Chris: My favorite performance of hers? I have to go with *Proof*. Hands down. I mean, she's fabulous in everything, and it's a very close second with *Rabbit Hole*. But *Proof* was my first experience seeing that kind of performance from her, so it's always going to stick out.

Jessica: For me, it's *Cat* [*on a Hot Tin Roof*]. *Cat* was so different from how he is, *ever*, that it was just a really great show to see. I lost *Chris*, you know? I think that was the best work that he's done.

Chris: What, you didn't like *Bash*? What was wrong with *Bash*?!

Jessica: *Nothing* was wrong with *Bash*. *Bash* is a close second. But he's so scary in that play. I didn't *want* to like him in that.

Future Projects

Chris: I'd like to direct her at some point. But I'm kind of glad that this show I'm directing [*The Shape of Things*] doesn't have a role for her in it, because I know how catty people can be. I'm glad no one can say, "Oh, gee, big *surprise!* He cast his *wife!*"

Jessica: Yeah, I'm too old for it. I wish I *wasn't* too old. I wish I knew about that script 10 years ago.

Chris: She *is* doing the costumes for it, though. But she said she won't stage-manage for me, and I think it's a really good idea that she doesn't.

Jessica: We don't fight, and I'd like to *keep* it that way.

Newlyweds playing a couple on Richmond Hill stage

Quad City Times – February 7, 2010 – by David Burke

Consider this Chris White and Jessica Nicol White's honeymoon.

The couple is doing their first show — a two-person romantic comedy called "Wrong For Each Other" — since they got married during October in Jamaica.

The Richmond Hill Players production, directed by Craig Michaels, opens this weekend at the Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill.

The romantic comedy, written by Canadian Norm Foster, follows a couple from their meeting to their eventual divorce.

Not exactly something a couple married three-plus months wants to think about, right?

"Some of the argument scenes are a little awkward because we don't really fight that much," Chris White said. "It's a little odd to be mad at my wife whether I'm playing a character or not."

The two were asked to audition for the show, which they hadn't heard of until they read the script. They both read through and liked it, but never presented themselves as a package deal.

"We were surprised and happy all at the same time" to be cast, Nicol White said.

The Whites — she's 32, an Atkinson, IL, native, works for the U.S. government and performs in ComedySportz; he's 31, a Blue Grass, IA, native and a security guard — first met while performing in the interactive whodunits presented by It's a Mystery.

In 2005, they were cast in "The Nerd" at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre in Moline and began going out. She specifically called them "non-dates" since both of them endured bad breakups before that show began.

"Wrong For Each Other" is the fifth show they've done together. He's already got much of the rest of the year booked, designing the set for Quad-City Music Guild's "Guys and Dolls" this summer and directing the Neil LaBute romantic drama "The Shape of Things" this fall at Richmond Hill.

Both say it's the best of situations to be acting onstage with their spouse. "It's always fun to act opposite her," he said.

"It is comfortable, we can work together. And I can say, 'I don't like the way you're doing that line,' " she said. "There's a lot of give and take, which makes it easy because we're so comfortable.

"I wouldn't want to do every show with him, and I'm sure he feels the same way about me."

Richmond Hill Players open season tonight

Dispatch-Argus – February 10, 2010 – by Claudia Loucks

Craig Michaels says "Wrong for Each Other" was the right fit for him.

The Rock Island man is directing the romantic comedy as the first production of the Richmond Hill Players' 2010 season, which opens tonight. It's his first directing experience with the Geneseo group, although he appeared on stage there as Lenny in "Rumors" (2002) and as Robert in "Proof" (2006).

Mr. Michaels said he fell in love with "Wrong for Each Other" when he first read it shortly after its publication in 1993.

"I had seen much of Norm Foster's prior work, but the unique story of Nora and Rudy's relationship really resonated with me," he said. "His dialogue was true, his presentation novel, and the contrast of Rudy's blind optimism with Nora's struggle to overcome her past seemed so honest and endearing.

"It went to the top of my list of shows to produce, but the circumstances never fell into place until now."

In the play, a chance meeting in a restaurant -- after four years apart -- sends an estranged couple flashing back through the highs and lows of their courtship and marriage. The Richmond Hill production features Chris White and Jessica Nicol White of Colona, a real-life married couple, in the roles.

Mr. Michaels, a native of Canada, grew up in a small town in eastern Ontario, on the border with New York state. He said he had the "bug of entertainment" at a young age.

"I watched variety shows starring Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, Dean Martin, Dick Clark, and that's who I wanted to be -- a host, an emcee, the guy who knew all the varied acts and presented them to the world," he said.

All the make-believe as a news anchor or a singer in his family's basement led him to a full-time job as a disc jockey at a local radio station when he graduated from high school.

"Aside from two years in college studying graphic design and psychology, I have been working in the media industry for over 30 years," he said.

Since arriving in the Quad-Cities, he has been on stage with local theater groups and directed four shows for Playcrafters.

"I also enjoy being involved behind the scenes, bringing my talents to bear to ensure the growth and stability of theater in the QCA from the business side," he said. "I served on Playcrafters' board of directors for three years, with a year as president in 2008. I manage most marketing duties for Playcrafters, and I also manage Web sites for RHP and Music Guild.

"A great deal of what I do today, in both theater and as part of my multimedia company, continues to be all about presenting ideas, products, concepts to the world on behalf of my clients through print, online, video and live-event mediums."

Mr. Michaels prefers directing shows to being cast as a character. "I find it a more encompassing challenge that allows me to draw on many of my skills, including television production and visual design, to paint a broader picture than playing a single role," he said.

"That, and as I get older, it's more difficult to memorize lines."