

Epic Journey: Trinity's Black Odyssey Is a Powerhouse



Trinity Rep opens the new year with a play that is epic indeed: Marcus Gardley's *Black Odyssey*, which transposes Homer's story of Ulysses' decades-long journey to come home from the Trojan War onto an African American Second Gulf War veteran, swept off a transport ship on his way back from a tour of duty. Co-directed by company members Joe Wilson Jr. and Jude Sandy, the play sends the veteran (played by Wilson) not on a journey through geography (Mediterranean or otherwise), but rather "floating in history" through the moments of crisis that, over the centuries, would shape present-day man. Ulysses becomes a chess piece contested between the sea god Great Grand Paw Sidin (Omar Robinson) and the sky god Great Grand Daddy Deus (Sandy) — whose exchange of insults over their game displays both Gardley's brilliant language and the stand-out power of Robinson and Sandy — after he kills Paw Sidin's son, a one-eyed civilian in Afghanistan. Wilson's Ulysses is a complicated man — funny, desperate, haunted by guilt — whose very body, so fraught in his own life and affected by all the events he passes through, becomes his guide home, as he follows his blood and his palm lines to find his heart ("You can't get out of here without a past," says Circe).

The cast are all fantastically talented singers, and under Michael Évora's musical direction, they start off the play with a journey through time in miniature — a beat and a chant give way to the spiritual "Deep River" (pouring out liquor in both ancient Greek and African-diaspora tradition) and then to the Motown-ish "Still Water," complete with audience participation. Music and dance (with choreography by yonTande) serve as touchstones as Ulysses drifts through time, from Afro-Cuban Orisha dance to Mardi Gras to work songs to some surprising Sirens ("Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" makes an obvious but welcome appearance). In Gardley's spin on the myth, Ulysses' great quest — for home and family — is also his greatest danger, as longing and temptation almost entrap him over and over again in familiar music, or the ability to be part of movements in black history, or the pampering of a great-great-grandmother, or banquets of soul food. Cloteal L. Horne, as Circe, delivers one of the bravura speeches with which the play is well-stocked, praising the dishes of her table in an ecstasy that leans toward sexual. Zeus' offspring and their terrible personalities, and the sage advice of the blind seer Superfly Tiresias (Sandy) to well-known black Americans, are other showpiece speeches.

Juxtaposed with Ulysses' story is that of Nella P. (Kalyne Coleman), the wife he left behind, and Malachi (Kai Tshikosi), the son he never met. Encouraged to remain steadfast by Great Aunt Tina (Julia Lema), Ulysses' patron goddess taking on human form and all its infirmities, Nella raises Malachi in a world that's out to get him and she is subsequently tempted by a suitor — Paw Sidin in disguise — not out of lust or infidelity, but for the promise of stability and a male role model for her son. Another awesome choice by Gardley is to swap out the funeral shroud that Homer's Penelope weaves for her husband for a quilt of Malachi's life, sewn into the flag the Navy sent her with his death certificate. Malachi's perils

are very real and physical, as he is threatened by police for the crime of walking home while black.

One of the play's strongest scenes is the one in which Ulysses washes up on the roof of the Sabine family in New Orleans. The year is 1968, and the floodwaters submerging the Sabine house are both the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the rising waters of Hurricane Katrina. Horne, here playing Mrs. Sabine, points out to Ulysses the other people in the neighborhood, waiting for the rescue of being able to tell their stories: the Scottsboro Boys sleeping on another roof, wrongfully convicted by an all-white jury; the four little girls killed in the Birmingham 16th Street Church bombing; Emmett Till lynched at the age of 14, hanging on a tree and whistling. As the waters rise with no rescue in sight, Ulysses offers to take Benevolence Nausicaa, the daughter, on his raft to safety — another child separated from her parents. Jackie Davis, as Benevolence, somehow portrays a completely convincing 10-year-old girl while also having the presence and the power for some stunning moments late in the show.

Kara Harmon creates a wide range of costumes for the different eras and moods of the play, including some wonderfully colorful patterns and cuts that only appear on the actors out of character as company members. Peter Sasha Hurowitz and Edward E. Haynes Jr, on projection design and set design, respectively, likewise create a multitude of different worlds, some under the ocean itself, through projection on and behind a giant curtain made of chains.

Black Odyssey is a story that needs to be told, told as only theater can tell it, with a powerhouse cast and creative team. Not to be missed!

Trinity Rep presents *Black Odyssey* by Marcus Gardley, directed by Jude Sandy and Joe Wilson, Jr. through Feb 3. Run time: 2 hours and 50 minutes. Presented in the Dowling Theater. For tickets and more information visit trinityrep.com/buy-tickets/ or call 401-351-4242.

Futurity Makes the Sound of Present Action



When you enter to take your seat for Wilbury Theatre Group's production of *Futurity*, you could be forgiven for thinking you've passed through the curtains into a slightly shifted dimension. Instead of a play, a chalkboard on stage advertises live music - "tonight at 7:30!" - played by "The Algorhythms." Brien Lang, *Futurity's* director, explained that creator César Alvarez wanted to shake up the convention of the theatrical musical and perform instead for the engaged, fourth-wall-piercing audience of a concert. After a bit of pre-song banter, the multitalented cast (everyone plays, many on several different instruments) gets going with the story of fictional Union soldier Julian Munro and the early 19th-century historical figure Ada Lovelace, considered the first computer programmer.

Munro (Alexander Platt) and Lovelace (Meg Sullivan) correspond about the possibilities offered by machines to humans. Eventually, they optimistically decide to build what they call a Steam Brain — a computer with imagination and creativity like a human brain, that, free of human prejudices and human limitations, can imagine paths to peace. Platt's Munro, who sings of his dreams of forging a peaceful future through science in the fast-paced "Don't Wait," is a man whose intellect and passionate energy cannot be constrained by his role as Army draftee. But his days are marked by the rhythms of war, as his regiment marches to Virginia to dismantle a railroad supplying the Confederate troops, and then off to fight the enemy. His is a world where peace isn't as simple as everyone laying their arms down when the conflict is over even if the United States decides whether or not it can treat black people as property. How can we even have the conversation about whether machines can have humanity when we don't acknowledge the humanity of other humans? Even knowing, going in, that *Futurity* was a Civil War-era play about building a computer, I didn't see this twist on the theme coming, and it's very effective. Jason Quinn is a stand-out in the cast as The General, giving a powerful speech recognizing that his fight to be seen as human will last long after the war is over, and taking the lead solo in the subsequent song ("I am still in the valley of the shadow of death...").

Wilbury's production of *Futurity* is the first one that isn't done by the creators themselves, Alvarez and The Lisps, and Lang says that it was initially intimidating, but then liberating, to make new choices about how to present the work. He chooses to lean even further into the theme of music. It's not just that the story is presented in the form of a concert (with lighting by Kelly Lipsey that does double duty as an LED-centric concert lightshow and an atmospheric theater design), or even that when ordered to "present arms" before battle, the soldiers raise their instruments. The marvelous Steam Brain itself, conceived by set designer Keri King and finally revealed late in the show after great anticipation, is partly composed of chimes, bells, melodicas and other musical instruments. "Music and letters," says Lang, "were the way people communicated in this period." That sentiment is borne out in the way Munro's comrades in arms pass folk-like tunes such as "Banks of the Arkansas" or "Cumberland Gap" back and forth as they march or make camp, sing work songs like "Sinner's Land" while dismantling the railroad tracks/building the computer, or join with Quinn in the psalm. The soldiers-ensemble aspect, heightened through the musical re-arrangement work of music director Milly Massey along with Lang, was one of my favorite parts of the show (it seems almost counterintuitive to pick out specific people, but Dave Carney on bass and Christine Treglia on percussion set the rhythm of the march or the machines and kept it all going, and Ava Mascena's violin lent Ken Burns-esque flavor to slower numbers).

Is the future laid out like a railroad track, or are its potential paths as many as the pathways in the brain? Well, the play contains, as it must, an element of disappointment on that front: We all know that no computer was developed in the 19th century to successfully end all war, try as Munro might to throw his body into operating the machine when he sees his comrades fall in battle. Nor did the Internet, alluded to in the show, finally become the technological advance that would hit on the way to break through bias and find the humanity in humans. But the Lisps' message is ultimately optimistic. Each soldier might be, as *Futurity* presents it, "a cog in a machine" - but what that means is not that each person is an emotionless metal part, but rather that the whole machine is, at least in Wilbury's production, more like a chorus of humanity. That chorus, with all voices working together as scientists or artists or just as people who can imagine problems being solved beyond our own lifetimes if not within them, can change the future.

The Wilbury Theatre Group - 40 Sonoma Court, PVD - presents Futurity through Dec 30. For tickets and more information, visit thewilburygroup.org or call the box office at 401-400-7100.

Trinity's Powerful Ragtime Evokes a Sense of Community



Rebecca Gibel as Evelyn Nesbit and cast of *Ragtime*.

Photo by Mark Turek.

Going to the theater is always a communal experience. Even in a movie theater — who's never experienced a time when fellow audience members applauded at the end, or cheered for a good line? And how much more communal is the experience when you and the people you're packed into the seats with are sharing the room with the artists? Trinity Rep's new production of *Ragtime*, directed by Curt Columbus, takes full advantage of theater's communal dimension. From the opening number, where immigrant and labor activist Emma Goldman's (Janice Duclos) "Let me at those sons of bitches!" was met with a laugh and a cheer from the audience, to a passionate speech late in the play, calling out callous respectability that received as much applause as any musical number, Trinity's production invites viewers to feel the characters' struggles as their own, and viewers are responding.

Goldman, like the "sons of bitches" Fred Sullivan's J.P. Morgan and Brian McEleney's Henry Ford, is one of the real-life historical characters who act as a chorus to the fictional story of three families: a black couple, Coalhouse Walker Jr. (Wilkie Ferguson III) and Sarah (Mia Ellis), and their son; a white upper-class suburban family, headed by Mother (Rachael Warren, perfectly cast); and two Jewish immigrants, Tateh (Charlie Thurston, in as wonderful and sincere a performance as ever) and his daughter. These stories provide not only the maybe-expected narratives of the oppressions imposed on various groups by the America in which so many dream of playing an equal part, but also, importantly, a model of standing up. Mother, for instance, finds her liberation from the limited role prescribed for (wealthy) women not in shedding her corset — although she does, more on that in a moment — but in protecting Sarah and her infant son when her husband (Mauro Hantman) and social propriety would have it otherwise.

There are zero weak links in the cast (it's hard to choose who to mention, but Stephen Thorne as Harry Houdini escapes from straitjackets and things on stage and that's pretty cool), but Ellis' performance of the tragic "Your Daddy's Son," and the hopeful "Wheels of a Dream," where Ellis's Sarah and Ferguson's Coalhouse dream of their son traveling through a free America, combine strong musical performances with a powerful emotional pull to make those numbers highlights of the show.

Columbus and his actors do a lot with a little; in the true Trinity spirit, the set (by Eugene Lee) represents a rehearsal room, and costume designer Kara Harmon puts the cast in street clothes for the first act, then in traditional early 20th century costumes for the second. Warren's costume change back to street clothes in the second act heralded, for me, less Mother's personal liberation and more a pointed reminder that the issues the play touches on — the struggles of immigrants, the police murders of unarmed black Americans — are completely contemporary. (Columbus says, "All of the issues in 1905

that E.L. Doctorow is writing about are the issues of today ... the Black Lives Matter text of the book, the women's rights text of the book, and the immigration text of the book are literally everything we are dealing with now ... What I hope is that maybe we can make changes as a community so that these issues are not still the burning issues of 50 years from now.") The use of contemporary dress also allows for another moment of communal understanding toward the very end of the play; I don't want to spoil it, because it's incredibly effective not only to see the choice the production made in tying the play's events to the present day, but to be in a room full of other people who also see and understand that visual, and to wonder how much that mass of people could do with that understanding and community.

Trinity evokes this feeling very intentionally, bringing up the house lights as Coalhouse urges his supporters to tell the story of their fight for justice and "make them hear you." Nor do they want viewers to let their outrage at injustice or their zeal for change simply drain away after an evening at the theater - during the run of *Ragtime*, they are registering voters in the lobby. In this way, they're trying to work toward the aspirational America of the play - maybe not the one it shows as a current reality, but the one its characters dream of.

Ragtime runs through May 27 at Trinity Repertory Company, 201 Washington St, PVD. For tickets and more information, go to trinityrep.com

[The Gamm's Strong Actors Shine in Earnest](#)



Front, L to R: Jeff Church (John Worthing, J.P.), Jeanine Kane (Miss Prism); Back, L to R: Nora Eschenheimer (Gwendolen Fairfax), Deb Martin (Lady Bracknell), Tom Gleadow (Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.), Marc Dante Mancini (Algernon Moncrieff), Alison Russo (Cecily Cardew) Photo by Peter Goldberg

The Gamm opened their season last week with Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Fred Sullivan, Jr. It's a strong, albeit thoroughly traditional, production of the play; designer Patrick Lynch's beautifully set-dressed and very Victorian sitting room is the first thing the audience sees and it sets the tone for the show as a whole, while Sullivan's smooth direction mostly lets Wilde do the work.

Jeff Church was born to play roles like Jack Worthing; not only can he speak Wilde's words as naturally as breathing, it also felt unusually clear to me what substance all of that style was a cover for. Church's performance, as a result, is all the funnier for how natural it is - the instinctive generation of wit by the character to cover real emotions like worry (because how unsophisticated would it be to have genuine emotions?) came across very clearly, rather than feeling like excuses for one-liners.

Church, along with Marc Dante Mancini as Algernon Moncrieff, the more flippant and carefree of the pair, meet their match in Nora Eschenheimer, as Gwendolen Fairfax, and Alison Russo, as Cecily Cardew, two headstrong young women whose mutual desire to marry a man called "Ernest" drives the plot. Both dominate their scenes (making the scene where they face off against each other almost more of a full-scale battle than a duel): Russo's Cecily, raised in an isolated country house, seems to be the mistress of a domain too small for her ambitions, and Eschenheimer's Gwendolen takes very much after her mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell.

As for Lady Bracknell, Deb Martin's over-the-top acting is better suited for that character than for Lady Croom in last year's *Arcadia*, but her best moments are still those when the character is actually angry or distressed. At other times, it's too hard to believe that she's representing the gatekeeper of respectable society, but she certainly is a presence in exactly the way Lady Bracknell needs to be, from her very first appearance in a costume giving her a slight resemblance to a terrifying bird of prey (costumes by David T. Howard). Tom Gleadow is delightful in the smaller role of Reverend Chasuble, and Jeanine Kane as Miss Prism rounds out the talented cast, who also sing and play instruments in a few scene-change interludes (music directed by Milly Massey).

I've left out one person - The Gamm's big gimmick, of course, is the inclusion of Oscar Wilde himself as a character, played by Brandon Whitehead as an emcee and guide to the show. Audience members around me loved it, as well as Whitehead's mugging in various small roles, but in my opinion the frame story didn't add anything. Indeed, alluding in several places pre-intermission to the events leading to Wilde's imprisonment for homosexuality (for those who read the program notes or are familiar), but dropping the frame story after intermission and making no attempt to bring Wilde's life either into tension or into resolution with the multiple happy heterosexual marriages that end the play, struck me as tasteless. Whitehead does a fine job, but Sullivan's concept is too underdeveloped to work.

I suppose one of the questions to be answered with this play is whether it's relevant anymore and whether that matters. A few of the lines that Sullivan restored from earlier drafts of the play make it especially clear that Wilde's characters are not isolated from social and political concerns and that if they live in a bubble, it is one of their own choosing (Cecily is assigned to read *Political Economy*, but warned that her observation of the relationship between class and idleness "sounds like socialism"). Dramaturg Rachel Walshe's program note draws parallels to social media in talking about how the characters construct their lives and selves through words and performance, and I found that that idea particularly resonated in Church's and Russo's performances (such as the scene in which Cecily asks Algernon to repeat his proposal so she can copy it into her diary). So why restore the character of Moulton the gardener just to give him an ad-lib about building a wall to keep the foreigners out? It's a cheap shot in the mouth of a minor servant role that lets off the upper-class characters fancying themselves educated but apolitical - is the play relevant or not?

The Importance of Being Earnest runs thru Oct 15; The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St, Pawtucket.
For tickets, go to gammtheatre.org/boxoffice

Mr. Burns Survives the Apocalypse

Telling people that I was going to review the Wilbury Group's production of *Mr. Burns*, I got a few variations on the same response: "Maybe I don't know a lot about theater - the only Mr. Burns I know is the one on 'The Simpsons!'" That is, in fact, the one. Anne Washburn's play, subtitled *a post-electric play*, follows a group of survivors of a nuclear apocalypse whose favorite piece of pop culture is lost to them, and who try to hang onto it first through storytelling among themselves and later through performing for others.

Director Brien Lang creates a successful production partly by enthusiastically committing to what the weird, sprawling script requires. The first act is lit only by the light of a campfire and occasional flashlight (the first production I've seen that's been willing to do that act mostly in the dark, making the worthwhile trade-off of full visibility for atmosphere). The audience, on Wilbury's now-trademark moving platforms, is seated around the campfire listening, along with the other characters, to Matt (Diego Guevara) recap the plot of the "Cape Feare" episode. (It's only the first of many elements that are set up in Acts I and II, before being brought back and transformed in Act III of this puzzle-box of a play. Before that act begins, the audience will also see the gesture of notebooks being held open and examined for the names of survivors, listen to a self-indulgent yet incredibly fun original medley of pop songs that shows off the diverse singing talents of the cast, hear about how long it takes irradiated areas to be safe for human life again, and more.) The cast delivers the dialogue naturally, rapid-fire with a lot of overlap, but they give clarity and weight to the moments that are important for the worldbuilding of the post-apocalyptic setting, or for the characters' quiet will to survive. (When the survivors are discussing where they came from and how they got to their current location: "I live here. Or, I lived here. - No, I live here.")

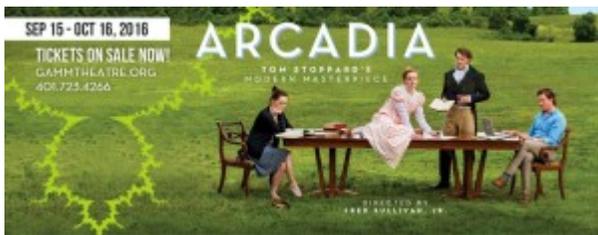
The first two acts in general are fairly plotless - more about developing the world and the ideas than about events happening - and the second act meanders more than the first, but the Wilbury Group makes it work because the characters care about each other and that makes us care about them, too. They could be doing anything to survive in the post-apocalypse and that likable ragtag-bunch-of-misfits element would still be there, but what they've chosen to do is perform "The Simpsons" episodes to the masses. Even their artistic disagreements (trying to provide meaning vs. providing pure entertainment because "we get meaning for free whether we like it or not") are aimed at making things better for their whole group. The collaborative relationship of the ensemble - both Wilbury's and the one portrayed in the play - is the heart of the show.

I won't reveal too much about how Act III plays out; it's a huge, weird stylistic departure from the previous two acts, with some shocking plot moments that I don't want to spoil. A few hints: The audience is wheeled up to the foot of the proscenium stage, which is used for the first time in this act. It's a musical, with the yellow-makeup'd actors playing as well as singing under the music direction of Dave Tessier, but in spite of the familiar subject matter, there's a sense of artificiality and foreignness of style that could belong to a half-remembered "Simpsons" episode performed far in the future. Daraja Hinds is a wonderful Bart Simpson, capturing the character's essential childishness, but tempering it with the maturity thrust onto the kid in this darker version of the world (and with a fantastic, strong voice). One speech is a mashup of *Night of the Hunter* and *Peter Pan*, and you will probably buy into it.

Lang explains that he took inspiration from the pageant of *Book of Mormon* performed annually in upstate New York, where hundreds of devout amateurs gather to re-enact the founding events of their faith. (Going back to what I said about what makes this production work - wholehearted commitment.) The actual tale of the apocalypse at the start of Act III of *Mr. Burns* gets a little lost, but another moment of shared memory (again, no spoilers) is very moving, and the final moments of the play bear out the goal of honoring the new civilization's founding myth and making something "amazing" as a collective.

In a word ... excellent.

[The Gamm's Arcadia Is a Modern Masterpiece](#)



There's a lot going on in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, currently opening the season at The Gamm. A viewer unfamiliar with the play might expect the poetry or the landscape design history from a story set in a country house in the early 19th century, but they might not expect it to contain quite so much about chaos theory or thermodynamics. Somehow it all works.

Stoppard, in characteristic fashion, combines all these ideas by putting them in the mouths of very smart people. Grace Viveiros, as mathematical prodigy Thomasina Coverly, walks the difficult line of playing young (13) without feeling false to the character's personality; enjoyable in flights of whimsy, she's nonetheless at her best in Thomasina's serious moments, when she strives to explain her ideas about mathematics and physics to her tutor even though the terms and equations she needs haven't been invented yet. Jeff Church, as Thomasina's tutor Septimus Hodge, is perfectly cast and handles both his scenes teaching (and learning from) his pupil, and outwitting other members of the household, with ease.

Juxtaposed with the 19th-century scholars are two present-day academics delving into the history of the house's inhabitants. Tony Estrella, as the blustering Bernard Nightingale, and Jeanine Kane, as the quiet, practical Hannah Jarvis, benefit greatly from their long history on stage together. Bernard and Hannah are more alike than they can admit, and Estrella and Kane both bring a lot of nuance to their roles as well as a great deal of non-romantic chemistry. Kane shows us the passion and occasional blind faith of a scholar who prides herself on rationality, and Estrella lets us see Bernard's knowledge of and genuine admiration for the works of his subject Lord Byron, in a role that could easily become pure caricature. I found Bernard's impromptu declamation of "She walks in beauty" (matched by Hannah's of another poem later on) particularly sincere and effective.

The cast as a whole is very strong, despite inconsistencies in the accent work that were quite surprising for a company of The Gamm's caliber. Besides the four leads, the production also benefits from solid

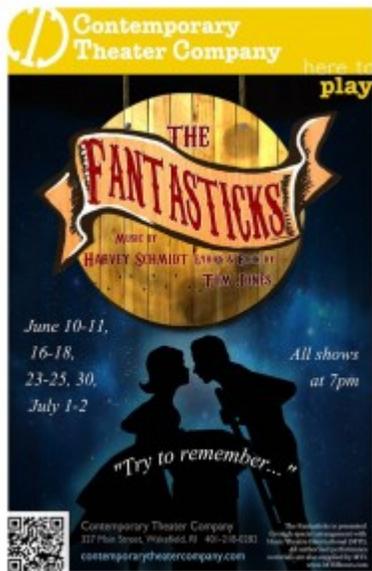
acting in the smaller roles; a stand-out was Brandon Whitehead's hapless Mr. Chater, all the funnier for being played dead straight and as sympathetically as possible. Unfortunately, Jesse Hinson and Deb Martin, in the two important supporting roles of Valentine Coverly (present-day) and Lady Croom (past), appear to have wandered in from different plays entirely — Hinson from some non-Stoppard work where people are sullen about knowledge instead of enthusiastic, and Martin from a panto or Monty Python.

In a play whose central dilemma is the tension between reason and feeling, expressed in many forms — the classical garden of meadows and lakes versus the “irregular” or “picturesque” garden of rocks and ruins, the researcher's evidence versus hunch, order versus chaos in the universe — director Fred Sullivan leans toward reason. He has wisely, in my opinion, focused on the passion for knowledge rather than on the potential for romantic intrigue between characters in the modern-day scenes, and soft-pedaled the romance in the 19th-century scenes in a way that lets it develop subtly from the characters' intellectual connection. The set, unlike most of the production, owes more to the “irregular” than the balanced. I can understand the urge to distinguish The Gamm's production from every other production that has a big table at center stage, but the asymmetric placement of a small table at one edge instead leads to a number of awkward and forced moments in the staging.

I have to put in a few words for the play itself. It is, as Sullivan writes in his director's note, a “modern masterpiece,” beautifully constructed, funny and devastatingly sad. The performances of the central quartet, and Sullivan's insight into the play's themes, more than make up for the production's shortcomings. It's been extended through October 23, so take advantage of the opportunity to catch it!

Arcadia runs through Oct 23 at The Gamm Theatre at 172 Exchange St in Pawtucket.

[The Fantasticks: Another Daring Choice for CTC](#)



There's a moment in *The Fantasticks* where Henry, an old Shakespearean actor, puts on his doublet to recite. "It's torn, I know - forget it," he says, asking El Gallo (and the audience) to remove, in their imagination, "10 pounds of road dust from these aged wrinkled cheeks." In the Contemporary Theater Company's current production, Henry (Terry Simpson) and the doublet are neat and clean, with nary a patch on them. It's a small moment, probably unimportant in the larger scheme of the show, but in a way, it reflects the production as a whole: very polished and very safe, in a way that demonstrates the great talents of CTC's company, but that doesn't always serve the show as well as it could.

The thing is, *Fantasticks* is a great choice of show for CTC. Like last fall's *Sweeney Todd*, the musical is well-served by the theater's small space and intimate atmosphere. But this production, from the same directing team of Chris Simpson and Jean Maxon-Carpenter, is less scrappy and more sedate. The play (with music by Harvey Schmidt and a book and lyrics by Tom Jones) contains admittedly dated language and stereotypes, which CTC has seamlessly and successfully modernized. However, treating the plot itself, a subversion of Romeo-and-Juliet-esque stories of love between children of feuding families, like it's just as conventional as the targets of its satire dulls its point: that relationships are messy and that a love story doesn't end at the altar. The production could skimp less on the young lovers' passionate stupidity in the first act, or on the frightening elements of their separate journeys of self-discovery in the second. Slow staging of physical sections and a curious reluctance to follow through on some of the images the lines call for (striking in a show that's intentionally visually spare) also contribute to the impression of sedateness.

Amelia Giles is El Gallo, the bandit who plays a key role in securing the marriage between the boy and the girl. There's no way Giles can pass for 40, as the character is described in the lines - the joke when the teenage Luisa (Isobel McCullough) calls her "very old, I'd say nearly 40" isn't that she's younger - but it doesn't matter because she owns the stage as she swishes about in a long black coat. Since Giles' role as someone who is outside the reality of the story's little world as well as part of it is played up - El Gallo is always the show's narrator, but in CTC's production, she also serves some of the functions of the Mute, balancing a long pole on her hat to serve as the wall between the two houses or being on the receiving end of monologue - her age is a lot less incongruous than it sounds. And she's got a wonderful voice, especially in the famous "Try to Remember." Another cross-cast role is Bellomy (Ashley Moore), who in this production is Luisa's mother; this distinguishes her a little more from Hucklebee (Tim Mahoney) than productions sometimes manage, and lets Luisa put a really interesting spin on her lines

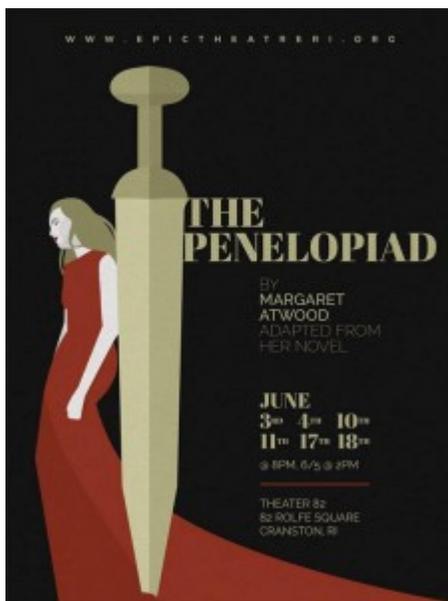
about “want[ing] much more than keeping house,” for instance.

CTC has done a lot of daring work, and *The Fantasticks* is a great show for them as a company and as a space. Their cast and production team (a mix of complete newcomers and longstanding veterans) definitely have the chops to put the edge back on this play.

The production also features Neil Motta as Matt and Kyle Couture as Mortimer. It runs through July 2 at the Contemporary Theater Company.

The Fantasticks, thru Jul 2 at Contemporary Theater Company, 327 Main St, South Kingstown. For tickets, contemporarytheatercompany.com

[The Penelopiad Weaves a Wonderful Tale](#)



If you're anything like me, you read the *Odyssey* back in school and remember maybe a little about Odysseus's wife Penelope. It's not a spoiler for Epic Theatre's production of *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood's stage adaptation of her own novella, to say that director Kira Hawkrigde takes inspiration for her stage pictures from Penelope's most memorable feat: deceiving her horde of suitors by promising to select a husband once her weaving is complete, then secretly unweaving it every night. Hawkrigde has her all-female cast weave long strips of fabric, hanging from the ceiling like a giant loom, into shapes both abstract and literal. It's striking in itself (one of my favorites was the image of Odysseus's sailors hanging off the rigging of their ship as they first bring Penelope to Ithaca to be its new queen), and also a great way of working in the difficult Artists' Exchange performance space.

The Penelopiad has a built-in advantage over some of the other page-to-stage adaptations in Epic's past few seasons, in that the narration is already first-person. MJ Daly, as Penelope, grabs the audience from the very first line. As a queen who has been dead for thousands of years by the time she's sharing the

room with the Epic audience, she is regal but has no more need for formality. Daly is conversational with us as she narrates her life and describes her worldviews, but completely believable as a person of that world and time.

Penelope's narration is counterweighed by the voices of the ensemble, and it's their "We are the maids / the ones you killed / the ones you failed" that provides (again, in my experience as a reader who didn't remember the maids' role in the *Odyssey*) a central mystery of the play. They also play the various important figures in Penelope's story, among them her husband Odysseus (Melanie Stone), cousin Helen (Kerry Giorgi), son Telemachus (Tammy Brown) and overbearing suitors (Christine Pavao is especially menacing). As the maids, though - gossiping, singing, mocking and telling the audience a life story no less neglected than Penelope's - they're a constant presence in Penelope's life as themselves. What is it, then, that Penelope does to them that leaves them haunting her? That's revealed as events spiral frighteningly and tragically downward, to the end of the *Odyssey* plot and past it.

In a play that (unavoidably) hits the plot beats of the *Odyssey* rather than striking out into a new narrative for Penelope, Hawkrigde and her cast give the events that are most important to Penelope, and not to Odysseus, the time they need to land. In particular, one moment near the end is quite slow and deliberate, and painful to watch in the best way.

Penopliad is the culmination of Hawkrigde's ensemble-centric work with Epic Theatre and Out Loud Theatre, and also of Epic's page-to-stage work. It runs for one more weekend at the Artists' Exchange in Cranston.

Penopliad runs through June 18; Theatre 82, 82 Rolfe Square, Cranston. For tickets, epictheatreri.org

MAC: How Many Characters in a Deck?

Describing *MAC* to someone else makes it sound like little more than the nth in a line of gimmicky reworkings of Shakespeare, or of *Macbeth* specifically. The Scottish Play as a two-person show with close-up card magic! Don't let that deceive you. The play reduces to a two-hander with ease, and having the major characters other than the Macbeths represented by cards - that they can manipulate as they will, or that fate throws in their path over and over - works surprisingly well and highlights the claustrophobia of the plot.

Amy Lee Connell and Shawn Fennell, in addition to playing Lady Macbeth/Witch and Macbeth, have developed an extensive schema mapping cards to characters or other elements of the play, as well as the repertoire of tricks to establish and reveal them. The mapping is clear and the reveals are clever and genuinely shocking, even in a plot one already knows (and this isn't a production for *Macbeth* first-timers).

As far as acting, Connell and Fennell both get chances to monologue, but are best when playing opposite each other. In these scenes, generally taking place on the red-lit Aurora stage instead of around the table, there is a clear shift from Macbeth's hesitancy and Lady Macbeth's steely resolve in

the initial murder, into Macbeth's increasing readiness to eliminate his enemies and Lady Macbeth's remorse and madness, thanks to the actors' great attention to even short lines of text in a heavily cut script.

Some re-ordering of the Shakespearean text, particularly toward the end, left it unclear what was or had been happening: Was the entire show up until then part of Lady Macbeth's reliving the murder(s) in her sleep? A more conscious decision to re-enact the events? What, then, are the cards for? None of these are bad ideas for *Macbeth*, but putting them all together leaves the ending a bit murky. A more linear version of the ending, still playing in and out of the card-magic framework, might have been more satisfying.

MAC runs only about half an hour as part of FringePVD, and would be worth taking the time to see even if it were longer.

[A Little Trash and a Dash of Hope, and It's a Spaceship Now](#)

It's a testament to the feats achieved by NASA in the past few years that parts of Stuart Wilson's one-man show *It's a Spaceship Now*, premiered in 2013, already feel dated. The Mars rover? Old news - we have color photos of Pluto now!

On the other hand, it doesn't hurt that our sense of wonder at what humanity can accomplish in space is continually being refreshed, and that, after all, is what drives the plot of *Spaceship*. It's a story about amazing things framed in everyday actions and language: a kid grows up on "Star Trek" and the idea of boldly going..., dreams of traveling into space, and a few decades later, watches news reports of the Mars rover landing and feels that dream flare up again. So he converts an old Soviet ICBM to a spaceship, reasoning, "I got a missile and not a lot to do," borrowing his engineer dad's plasma cutter because it's one of those things, when you have it, you use it for everything.

The show begins with Stu - the actor, character, eventual namesake of the titular spaceship - making coffee for the audience while chatting. (Iced coffee is available in this iteration of the show.) It never feels gimmicky, and before the audience knows it, we've been brought in to Stu's story. The family drama of that story is largely downplayed in favor of the spaceship process ("the first spaceflight for artistic purposes"), but the few moments about Stu and his father possibly land better for it. Another strong section of the show is the Q&A, where Stu, in a white lab coat, answers audience questions about his planned spaceflight. Wilson, an experienced improv actor, says that he's rarely fazed by the questions; it's the occasional space-obsessed kid that runs the risk of stumping him.

The low-budget, somewhat cheesy aesthetic isn't inappropriate for a play about building a spaceship from stuff you found dumpster diving. A plastic Easter egg and clingfilm represent the missile shell and the Plexiglas windows when Stu needs to demonstrate what he did to make the spaceship, but the Tyvek spacesuit isn't the production budget at work - it's Stu's actual spacesuit in the story. A few scenes

involve prerecorded video of Wilson or other projected media, but the spaceflight itself is gloriously live.

Spaceship has been trimmed to about 45 minutes from previous longer runs, mostly, Wilson says, by cutting down on overexplaining. Five to 10 minutes of explanation of where he obtained the ICBM that becomes his spaceship are gone, since the logic of it isn't the important part. The streamlining is also aimed at making it a show that's not just for people who know him or his work around town - there are still enough real details dropped in to amuse those people (remember when he learned to wrestle for a Wilbury Group show?) but the slideshow of baby pictures is gone. The loss of a few of the song-and-dance numbers leaves some of the ones left over feeling a little tangential to the story, but one mid-show singalong number nonetheless pays off by loosening up the audience enough to count down to liftoff and to sing "Electric STU!" over the lyrics of Icehouse's "Electric Blue" at the end.

It's a Spaceship Now, Wilbury Theatre, 7/24 at 8pm as part of FringePVD.