

Does Dog Exist?: Two sisters, a governess and a canine suffering an existential crisis take the stage in *The Moors*



Vanessa Paige and Alexis Ingram in *The Moors*; photo credit: Dave Cantelli

Epic Theatre Company's artistic director Kevin Broccoli is ecstatic to have brought Jen Silverman's *The Moors* to Theatre 82 in a dark and alluring production directed by Vince Petronio (Wolf Hall) and featuring some Epic favorites on the stage. "Jen Silverman has one of my favorite minds in the theater," says Broccoli. "When I read *The Moors*, it was like nothing I had ever encountered, with so many brilliant references to the style it borrows from, while reinventing it along the way. It also offers a treasure trove of great characters and enough surprises to shock even the savviest of theater audiences."

The Moors is hailed as a fantastical riff on a world similar to one found in a Brontë novel, but with a modern and surreal twist. "It centers around two sisters and their dog who introduce a new governess into their stately home, only to have her presence disrupt their lives in ways they never could have imagined," explains Broccoli. "Meanwhile, a tragic encounter with a moorhen has their dog asking big questions of his own. This wild and wonderful story from one of America's hottest young playwrights is a blast of fresh air straight from the sharpest of imaginations."

It does keep you on your toes. How often do you get to see talented actors portray intense animals? One has to wonder what it's like to get into that headspace. Katie Westgate flies in as the moorhen, keenly aware of the risks involved in befriending a mastiff, portrayed by Rico Lanni. By all accounts from his humans, the dog "will rip your face off!" We actually feel sorry for the mastiff, as he lies by the humans' feet so sad and seemingly misjudged. However, the two form an unlikely bond, which is fun to watch as Westgate questioningly antagonizes Lanni. The moorhen is apprehensive, but much like any dog you've ever met, Lanni persists in his efforts to be liked and eventually wins the girl, so to speak.

Director of production management Samantha Gaus says, "I love a play centered around strong female characters, but more than that I love a show with animals. Particularly a dog having an existential crisis. Having Katie Westgate as our hen has been particularly amazing because she is so talented and such a joy to watch." She adds, "Kevin has such a talent for choosing brilliant and outside-of-the-box shows."

The gothic-era drama includes period furnishings (stage manager Emma Locke) and garb (by Jen Stavrakas), with the exception of the animals. What do these creatures wear, you might ask? Trench coats, of course! Basic lighting design (Kevin Thibault) illuminates the hay blocks that the animals chat on, as well as the salon/den, which the seemingly confused sisters whimsically refer to as other rooms in the home, such as the new governess' bedroom. It's not hard to follow the dysfunction, though. Marjory, portrayed by Vanessa Paige, expertly gives us little clues to indicate when she is the house maid with typhus (cough cough); Mallory, the scullery maid with child; or the author, Margaret. Turns out she's quite good at manipulating in general. We're also taken in by Emilie's (Alexis Ingram) decorous mannerisms. Her character development is, shall we say, winning. (Sorry, there'll be no intentional spoilers here!)

The sisters, Huldey (Kerry Giorgi) and Agatha (Stephanie Traversa) have secrets of their own. It's like watching a tennis match when they talk with Emilie, your head volleying back and forth to see what each will say next, since nothing is quite as it seems. Emilie isn't as addled as you might think, however. You'll love the twists and turns as the action builds to the stunning resolution.

In keeping with this season's theme at Epic Theatre - the power of truth - this ardently disturbing production seems largely fitting. "Vince Petronio is back in the director's seat for us," says Broccoli,

“and he’s crafted a production that we think is going to be the perfect midway point as we head into the latter half of our eighth season, and it’s our first time using the (slightly) larger space located at Theatre 82 since last June. It’s still intimate and inviting, but it allows us to tell the story with a few extra bells and whistles.” Just keep in mind - particularly in this case - some bells cannot be unrung!

Jen Silverman’s The Moors, directed by Vince Petronio, runs at Theatre 82, 82 Rolfe Sq, Cranston, through Mar 21. For tickets, go to epictheatreri.org Epic Theatre stated the following regarding COVID-19 on March 12:

“Here at Epic, we’re closely monitoring the current health situation, and we are in contact with local and state government about best practices. At the moment, we have not been instructed to cancel programming, and we’re under the capacity limits as detailed in the state guidelines.”