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Apt spring green rain

Aaron Krause Spring Green, Wisconsin - It's tucked away amid 110 acres of hilly forests and meadows near this town of about 1,600 in southwestern Wisconsin. American Players Theatre's Hill Theater, an outdoor arena with a capacity of 1,089 seats, the second largest in the country for a company dedicated to classics. (Photo: Alan Smason) Indeed, you can easily miss it if you are not on the lookout for signs. It shows the patron saint in the direction of the famous destination. But there's no reason to worry: If you go around it, there's a good chance you'll end up in perhaps the only store in a one-stoplight settlement. The clerk will probably get you back on your way with a smile. Once you spot the sign and follow it, the car will be light on the land of the country's second largest outdoor theater company dedicated to classics. You'll have arrived at the American Players Theatre (APT), founded in 1977. Today it attracts more than 110,000 people from across the country and beyond. APT works with an annual budget of more than \$6 million. The company's management draws on a group of classically trained actors. They fight bugs and sometimes rain brightly, and with authentic emotions, reach the back of the 1,089-seat outdoor Hill Theatre. Located atop a steeper hill than the 201-seat indoor Touchstone Theatre. Whether actors are slathered with bug spray and fight elements, or unexposed to them in the Touchstone space, artists are dedicated and talented. Members of the American Association of Theater Critics (ATCA) learned that and more during their annual conference here recently. Ameenah Kaplan at the American Players Theatre in Spring Green, WI. (Photo: Alan Smason) I'm starting to work with these amazing actors, said Ameenah Kaplan, one of this year's directors. She is a graduate of the Film School of the Academy of Arts and the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. This year, she's helming our country's good. The play is adapted from a novel by Thomas Keneally Playmaker. Members of the ATCA did not see the above. Critics, however, have seen five games. Each has a strong ensemble and individual acting. This year's line-up includes a mix of dramatic and comedic material. There are also some darker, more disturbing games. One of this year's more light-hearted plays is Shakespeare's As You Like It. The scenery consists mostly of props that actors bring on and off stage. However, it could easily be said that a peaceful, natural outdoor environment serves as an environment. While the Hill Theatre seats 1,089 people, the audience sits in a tense, semi-circular configuration. It enhances the sense of community between us and the actors. In addition, this production contains carefree songs. They further reinforce the bonfire-like atmosphere at times between the characters. With nature's animal sounds and trees souring on a clear night, the Arden forest perhaps never seems more appealing. And so, Rosalind/Ganymede, Celia/Aliena, Touchstone, Orlando and others escape to a quiet wooded area. Juan Rivera Lebron, Andrea San Miguel, Roberto Tolentino, Melisa Pereyra and Christian Wilson in How You Like It. (Photo: Liz Lauren) While these characters have been thrown out of court, they escape into perfect refuge. It's one for contemplation, hilarious-making, self-discovery and training in ways of romance. It is also advisable for artists to enter and exit from the aisle, within touching distance of the audience. As Jaques notes in the famous monologue Seven Ages man: The whole world is a stage, and all men and women only players. Putting actors down the aisle reinforces that we all play different roles on the world stage. In this staging, set during the 1870s but featuring some dubious costume choices, Jaques is a woman. Tracy Michelle Arnold plays her with a tingling melancholy without acting depressed. Instead, she imbues Jaques with scientific air. He is a decent man with confidence, wisdom and spirit, but one who ultimately prefers solitude. However, Arnold's Jaques seems comfortable in front of people while speaking Seven Ages man's speech. He acknowledges it in a conversational, deliberate tone without diminishing Shakespeare's poetry. It's as if Jaques is trying to get us to consider how speech is relevant to our lives. Meanwhile, it would be inappropriate not to mention Melissa Pereyra's charismatic performance as head of performance. It gives us a spirited, courageous, patient and at times vulnerable Rosalind. Pereyra offers multi-facet portrayals, whether played by Rosalind's real wife or male youth, Ganymede, as whom she disguises herself. Chris Klopatek, left, with Melissa Pereyra in How You Like It. (Photo: Liz Lauren) Pereyra speaks Shakespeare's poetry with ease and clearly reveals the meaning and emotions behind poetry. Elevated language is not limited to the work of the Bard at this year's festival. Another offering is a nane built, funny production of a play from a century after Shakespeare. The piece is a rarely-fitting Restoration Comedy Recruiting Officer. This work from 1706 also includes gender disguises and, of course, recruitment. While military officials try to recruit soldiers, the characters try to recruit each other for romance and marriage. While the game criticizes the less-than-healthy tactics of military recruiters, there's an aura of hilarity in this game. It is characteristic of the restoration period, after the long-time closure of theaters puritans. Art, including live theater, has been restored, much to the delight of artists. The feeling of celebration tangible in the production of this game that could benefit from editing. It takes a tad too long, especially with a scene involving a lucky narrative. But the actor's command of the language of playwright George Farquhar and the beauty of the Hill Theatre makes this production useful. Gavin Lawrence, left, and Jim DeVita in Blood Knot. (Photo: Liz Lauren.) Meanwhile, in the cover of the Touchstone Theatre, there's a palpably close-knit, fraternal bond between the siblings in The Athol Fugard's play Blood Knot. This twin is found during the apartheid era in South Africa. The play premiered in 1961 in Johannesburg and focuses on two brothers kept by the same black mother. One of the men is lighter than the other. The game is set decades ago. But this combustible work is terrifyingly familiar with the racial climate filled with 2018 tensions. Race is a big, complex problem. However, Fugard zooms in on his lens on one home. By personalizing the problem in a powerful, relatable way. We are seeing racial tensions adversely affecting the otherwise close bond between the two siblings, Morris and Zach. They share a one-bedroom shack in the non-white location of Korsten, near Port Elizabeth. To be sure, the game contains moments of hyper, almost child-like horse play between brothers. In this production, the occasionally explosive, at times muted Jim DeVita (Morris) and the dashing Gavin Lawrence (Zach) convincingly pass on that playfulness. These exceptional artists are as convincing as siblings. For example, they talk through each other as if they can almost feel what the other will say, based on their familiarity with themselves. But there's also a point during which Morris, a lighter-skinned brother, calls his sibling the N-. As DeVita menacingly uttered, you feel as if a sharp object suddenly hit you in the chest. Indeed, a disturbing feeling permeates the air through the entire second act. The second half was markedly contrasted with the slower, dull first act. Similarly, APT's mostly powerful production of eugène Ionesco's absurdist comedy Exit the King feels like it's never going to end. Live performances and at least one dizzying lighting effect are among the strengths of production. However, towards the game's final moments, one feels as if this piece is roughly two hours long as iceman cometh. Cassia Thompson (Queen Mary) and James Ridge in Exit the King. (Photo: Liz Lauren) Perhaps the turtle's pace towards the end is the deliberate choice of director Tim Ocel. Just as he highlights the absurd parts of death and dying, portrayed frankly and with great comic timing by this cast, it gives equal weight to the more relatable aspects of mortality. A clearly frightened, desperate James Ridge, like King Berenger, even asks those who died what it was like this land. Then, to an apparent endless end, he dies a seemingly infinite death. No doubt many of us have witnessed someone suffer for so long. Director Ocel does not give us a clear political message. Still, some may experience schadenfreude at the king's painful demise. She's one of at least two Trump characters in this year's APT line-up. Another such figure is the cocky, arrogant Harry Brock from Garson's comedy Kanina Born Yesterday. The play had its Broadway premiere in 1946. Some may also recall a 1950s screenplay with Judy Holliday as the good-natured but not-so-bright Billie Dawn. Reese Madigan, David Daniel, Colleen Madden and Chris Klopp in Born Yesterday. (Photo: Liz Lauren) In a sleek, comical production of APT, Colleen Madden doesn't smage Billie's stereotype of ditzzy blondes with an exaggerated New York accent. With that said, Madden's Billie, at least in the beginning, is far from eruted. But the actor penetrates Billie with dignity and a sense of self-worth that makes you care about her. This Billie's carefree charm and good-naturedness will win you over. So, too, will her fierce determination in the end to give up on Brock. At this point, Billie has learned more, thanks to her copious reading. Besides, it's not nearly as easy to push this former choir girl around. It's clear Brock's a villain. However, director Brenda DeVita is preventing the proceedings from going into melodrama. Born Yesterday is hardly a dated game. In today#MeToo, it's timely and refreshing to see women evolve into strong characters and successfully fight a bully. Hulking, commanding David Daniel, with slicked-back dark hair and sporting a luxurious suit, exudes arrogance, aggression and a sense of being in love with himself. Of course, there's no doubt he's rich. You could say that Brock is the antithesis of some people who work at APT. Director Risa Brainin. (Photo: Alan Smason) Risa Brainin, a freelance director, spoke with ATCA members as a panellist during one of several moderated discussions. She cited an example of how APT staff would help each other. It was pouring once and she wasn't wearing a raincoat. A colleague took it off and gave it to her. Looks like that person came prepared for bad weather. He had another raincoat underneath. It's likely Brock wouldn't have made that gesture. But he says he's worked hard all his life to get the wealth he owns. Similarly, there was a time when APT had a slim finances. David Frank, APT's former artistic director and producing artistic director, called the company one of the great miracles. It willed itself into existence with very little capital, the 23-year APT veteran said. But partly with the help of viewers willing to Classics, APT managed to climb out of a deficit of more than \$1 million. Meanwhile, Brainin touted hard-working actors. It takes so much energy to work outdoors, she said. As they battle bugs and rain, artists can go from one five-hour workout directly to another. I can't believe how ready they are when they come to rehearsals, Brainin said. Spring green area can be remote. However, those 110 acres of lush greenery provide a haven for theater artists to prepare classic, world-class productions for legions of audiences from across the U.S. and beyond. And judging by a recent visit to the ATCA, APT actors work great as sets and individual artists. The American Players Theatre is located at 5950 Golf Course Road, near Spring Green. Its 2018 season runs through November 18. For more information about showtimes and ticket prices, visit or call (608) 588-2361. 588-2361.