



ANIMAL FARM

THE THIRD PLAY IN THEATRICUM BOTANICUM'S 2017 REPERTORY SEASON, *ANIMAL FARM*, IS GEORGE ORWELL'S CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT THE CORRUPTING INFLUENCE OF POWER. SOUND FAMILIAR? *Photo by Ian Flanders*

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

Sir Peter Hall's acclaimed adaptation of *Animal Farm*, from the classic novel by George Orwell, is an inspired choice by Theatricum Botanicum's Artistic Director Ellen Geer.

As part of the company's "Rising Up" summer 2017 repertory season, this production, masterfully directed by Geer, was an absolute treat for the almost packed audience on opening night. Every square inch of the stage and sublime surrounding space available was utilized to wondrous effect.

Orwell's political satire about the corrupting influence of power charts the fall of idealism and the rise of tyranny after the animals of Manor Farm rise up against the oppressive human owner in a struggle for rights and equality.

Led by Snowball, an idealistic pig played to perfection by Christopher Yarrow, they take over the farm from cruel Mr Jones, ably portrayed by Steve Fisher. Keeping it in the family, Thad Geer was equally wonderful double-cast as Old Major and Pilkington.

Their plan goes well at first. All the animals are equal and content. They work hard but happily until some of the pigs, led by nasty Napoleon (brilliantly portrayed by Mark Lewis) and Squealer (the magnificent and mesmerizing Melora Marshall), yield to the lure of power and decide they are more equal than the others. As the new leaders of the pack, the pigs become even more cruel than Mr. Jones, over-working and starving their fellow animals for their own benefit.

There are also terrific turns from Rodrick Jean-Charles as Benjamin, Max Lawrence is brilliant as Boxer, and Lea Madda excels as Mollie, the horses. This is very much an ensemble piece, with all the actors strong and totally convincing as sheep, horses, pigs, dogs, cows, chickens, a cat, and a donkey. The choreography and movement of the animals is awesome. The horses' gait is especially wonderful. Kudos to Lexi Pearl, credited with animal movement.

A shout-out, too, to Cameron Rose who plays the plucky cockerel. Not many lines, but every tilt of the head and cock-like movement was spot on.

Young actors Sierra Rose Friday and Shane McDermott did a fantastic job as narrators.

The animal costumes were simple yet compelling and the animals easily identifiable. The dog costumes were the best in show.

One minor quibble. Each animal had one ear that was just the metal frame minus material. I found that a distraction, wondering if it was a mistake and spent time checking out all the ears to see if it was deliberate (I think it was), when I should have been focusing on the dazzling performances.

Apart from the missing fabric on the ears, congratulations to costume designer Beth Glasner, lighting designer Zach Moore and set designer Ernest McDaniel. Stage manager is Kim Cameron.

The singing throughout is mostly excellent. A couple of wobbly warbles, forgivable and to be expected on opening night. Lyrics are by Adrian Mitchell and music by Richard Peaslee.

Director Ellen Geer says, "In a revolution, things happen so quickly that sometimes, before people know it, the pendulum has swung right back again. The new leaders seize and hold onto power using military strength then lull the populace with propaganda. That's why apathy is so frightening. We delude ourselves into thinking that everything will be better, but we don't do the necessary work to make sure those in power don't abuse it."

There was one nod to the present day with an added reference to "fake news" that raised a laugh but, apart from that, this production sticks to the original script. Plus...a worthy added song from Peter Alsop for the chickens.

The play is set in England and the British references remain, including a fluttering Union Jack flag. As it was deemed okay to update the script with a reference to "fake news", why not replace the now defunct British tabloid the *News of the World* with *The Sun*? Or even the *National Enquirer*?

About Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum—This has been an oasis for theatergoers for more than 40 years, presenting Shakespeare and repertory classics in its stunning, rustic amphitheater nestled in Topanga Canyon.

Will Geer and Herta Ware created Theatricum as a haven for blacklisted actors during the McCarthy era, when communists were considered the enemy. Theatricum has successfully produced plays that frame contemporary social issues through the lens of classic literature. It is a recipient of the prestigious Margaret Hartford Award, the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle's highest honor for sustained excellence.

You can spot the regular Theatricum goers; they are the ones carrying a cushion to sit on. The seating can be hard. And don't forget an extra layer for evening performances. ■

Animal Farm runs through October 1 and is recommended for ages 10 and up.