

by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Clarkston



Photo by Cooper Bates

Echo Theater Company

In this mess of a world we relentlessly try to navigate on a daily basis, there are two universal gifts offered us in our lives that can heal. One is art; the other is love. Samuel D. Hunter's *Clarkston* is proof both are what we need to make our tenuous existence worthwhile.

Now in its west coast debut from Echo Theater and directed by the company's artistic director Chris Fields, this austere mounted but hauntingly beautiful production is one of the best presented in Los Angeles this year and its cast of three contributes significantly to that designation.

Hunter's story takes place in and around a Costco located near the Snake River in Clarkston, Washington, a community named after William Clark, the explorer who in his diaries wrote about discovering the place in 1805 only a few weeks before the Lewis and Clark Expedition first laid eyes on

the Pacific Ocean and ended their arduous 862-day journey.

Chris (Sean Luc Rogers) is a local kid and would-be writer trying to survive a horrendous childhood and find his way out of his restrictive dead-end life working the graveyard shift at the big-box warehouse. When he's assigned to train Jake (Michael Sturgis), a quirky and neurotic transplant from Connecticut obviously on the run from something in his life, a clumsy and difficult start leads to a personal connection neither of them initially foresee.

Jake's escape is an expedition of his own to find himself. The location was partially chosen because of his obsession with his distant relative William Clark's diaries but primarily in an effort to get away from middle-class privilege and his well-meaning parents understandably concerned about his recent diagnosis with Juvenile Huntington's Disease, a degenerative condition that will probably kill him before age 30.

Jake's Ivy League degree from Bennington College in Post-Colonial Gender Studies isn't much help either, something unfathomable to Chris, who in turn is desperately applying to programs to further his education and, besides jumpstarting a better life in a better place, give him some distance from his clinging meth-addicted single mother Trisha (Tasha Ames).

The script by the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant recipient Hunter, Obie winner for *A Bright New Boise* and author of *The Whale*, is sweetly vulnerable and achingly poignant, creating an indelible portrait of two young people in need and the curative power of human bonding.

Fields' staging is deceptively simple but his subtle visual touch is omnipresent. During blackouts, the actors don't race offstage in the dim blue light but walk off slowly and, even in shadow light still obviously in character, first one leaving and then the other, usually exiting in opposite directions.

Before each scene, they re-enter and pull individual narrow sections of a gossamer curtain to the center of the cinderblock rear wall of the playing space. By the play's conclusion, it has formed one intact backdrop, symbolizing an abstraction of the deepening connection between these two lost souls. It's a small directorial choice but it's a brilliant one.

The acting is the quintessential definition of ensemble work at its finest; if I had acting classes this semester, attending this production and having lengthy followup discussions about what these three performers accomplish together would be a class requirement.

Sturgis and Rogers (in an arresting professional stage debut) are truly wondrous to behold as Jake and Chris slowly become less wary and more trusting of each other—in many ways subtly becoming mirror images of one another's behavioral patterns, something that often happens in great relationships.

Ames' take on someone aching to but completely incapable of being a real mother to the son she adores is also heartbreaking, especially when it becomes obvious Trisha is never going to be strong enough to change.

As they sit on the bank of the Snake River and eventually along the majestic shores of the Pacific, Jake soothes his troubled friend by reading sections of his ancestor William Clark's dairies written while seeing the same vista unfolding before him for the first time so many years before.

"It's a terrible time to be alive," Jake blurts out early in his characters' tentative journey of his own making. "There's nothing left to discover."

Yet in Samuel D. Hunter's masterwork *Clarkston*, Jake's youthful cynicism is eventually proven wrong. It's a play all about discoveries—and each one makes the case that no matter how arduous our own trek though life may prove to be, trusting another heart in search of his or her own individual ocean is always worth the effort.

THROUGH OCT. 21: Echo Theater Company at the Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 747.350.8066 or www.EchoTheaterCompany.com



Photo by Ken Sawyer

Catalina Jazz Club

I don't usually write about anything running too briefly for anyone to still enjoy, but there are always exceptions—and a celebratory event such as having Los Angeles' own musical theatre superstar David Burnham in concert here appearing in his brand new show *Burnham Sings Bublé* needs to be shouted from the lighting grid even if it was only a much-anticipated one-night stand.

Besides, since Burnham was rocking our own eclectic neighborhood at the historic Catalina Jazz Club

and presented by LA's most prolific cabaret entrepreneur Chris Isaacson, I can put in a plug at the end for all three components collaborating to conjure this magical evening of classic cabaret.

Lemmetellya, all three are worth following.

Co-conceived with his trusty musical director Nick Petrillo at the keyboards leading a jazzy three-piece combo (Jonathan Richards on bass and Dave Johnstone on drums), *Burnham Sings Bublé* not only honors the extraordinary Michael Bublé, but it in turn also pays tribute to the wildly successful contemporary crooner's nearly quarter-century quest to renew public interest in the traditional pop songs originally made famous by groundbreaking artists even I barely remember from my youth back when the dinosaurs roamed.

I'm Burnham brings us some of the music world's most enduring standards first introduced by famous folks from Sinatra to Elvis to Dean Martin to Nat King Cole to Patsy Cline to The Beatles (oh, yeah, I remember *them* more clearly, if through a Purple Owsley haze), and he interprets these classics in his own unique style and with a voice so clear and dynamic I suspect it might have echoed all the way across the street to our McCadden Place apartment and beyond onto Highland Avenue.

Burnham is certainly possessed of splendidly seasoned musical theatre chops. Among many other impressive credits, he appeared as Fiyero on Broadway in the megahit *Wicked* and Fabrizio in *The Light in the Piazza*, a role that on tour won him Washington D.C.'s prestigious Helen Hayes Award for Best Actor and locally, long before I could proudly call him a friend, he was recipient of my own annual TicketHolder Award of Best Actor in a Musical in 2006 when the production played the Ahmanson.

In my review back then for *BackStage*, I wrote, "The night belongs to future star Burnham who, aside from having a knockout voice and exuding about a ton of charisma with every breath, will woo anyone in the *Light in the Piazza* audience who might not already be a fan of his work."

Still, his voice is so much more than that; it's a voice that can make every obviously smitten David Burnham devotee—and judging from the crowd at Catalina, there are many—swoon and sway as though they were attending an Ol' Blue Eyes concert in that legend's heyday. And truly, Burnham knows how to work his crowd better than almost anyone I've ever seen in concert.

Since he was born and raised right here in the Inland Empire, perhaps one of the most special things about the LA debut of *Burnham Sings Bublé* was also the presence in the soldout venue of many of his most supportive longtime friends and family members, most notably including his parents and sister Wendy, all of whom he graciously gave a shoutout to and further acknowledged by sharing some personal stories of his youth I suspect only those fortunate enough to be there that night will ever be privy to.

As with so many great cabaret performers, Burnham has a wonderfully infectious personality that radiates from the stage, making his sweetly personal and welcoming banter between songs appreciated by everyone in attendance. Of course, it doesn't hurt that the guy is also dazzlingly handsome and

possessed of a smile that could power the entire city of LA—in fact, the very first time I saw his work, starring in *Hot Mikado* for Musical Theatre West in Long Beach, he received my first ever (and only) special TicketHolder Award for “Best Teeth of 2004.”

I wish *Burnham Sings Bublé* had played much longer here at Catalina, but keep your eye out for a return, which I hope is in the cards at some point in the near future. In the meantime, check out his self-titled debut album featuring a remarkable collection of Broadway hits and classic songs, his more recent “David Burnham: One Day,” or his album of songs from his national tour appearing in the title role in Sir Andrew’s *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

David Burnham, someone our much-maligned reclaimed desert climes can proudly boast as one of our own, is a major, major talent—and that sparkling future I first wrote about some 20 years ago is right here, right now.

FUTURE BOOKINGS AND UPDATES: www.davidburnham.com / www.chrisisaacsonpresents.com / Catalina Jazz Club, 6725 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood. [323.466.2210](tel:3234662210) or catalinajazzclub.com

Memnon



Photo by Craig Schwartz

Getty Villa Museum Theater / Classical Theatre of Harlem

There's always something uniquely celebratory about revisiting the world of our most archaic theatrical traditions, to sit in an outdoor amphitheater sharing the thrill of seeing a play unfold live under the stars just as our ancestors first did around 500BC.

In Los Angeles, nowhere provides such an adventure more flawlessly than the Getty Villa Museum Classical Theater, located along the coast near Malibu in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood. It's truly an idyllic locale, surrounded by the incredible beauty of our coastline, a place where smelling the ocean breeze wafting through a complex dedicated to Ancient Greek and Roman art housed among the lush

gardens of a recreated Roman country home is part of the experience.

Each summer for the past 18 years, the Getty has presented a classic production, previously offering recreations of works written by fellows with names such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. This time out, however, in a coproduction with the Classical Theatre of Harlem, the Getty offers the world premiere of *Memnon*, an all-new play by Will Power honoring a character mostly ignored in classical mythology, an Ethiopian king who legend says traveled to Troy to fight alongside the Trojans against the Achaeans.

Memnon was a great hero, we're told, a favorite of the gods who was revered for being as fierce and courageous as warrior as his final adversary, the great Achilles. How Memnon's story was reduced to near obscurity through the centuries is a puzzlement, particularly since he and the tales of his bravery in battle were once among the most renowned and his dark-skinned image remains one of the most familiar in ancient wall frescos and vase paintings.

Hovering in the air, of course, is the question whether Memnon's nonrecognition could have anything to do with his race, something the playwright has set out to correct in an epic attempt to restore his story to its proper place in the history of Greek drama.

Beyond that, Power explains, "Thematically, the plays asks what is the nature of betrayal? When does sacrifice become too much? What is the essence of country or, for the ancient Greeks, the polis? What makes a citizen?"

Power has created a fascinating new work, something he says is not meant as a "modern day/ancient linguistic mash-up" but instead is a tale written in iambic hexameter in deference to the poetry of the Greeks and filled with the visual splendor and energy of its time-honored traditions.

In collaboration with director Carl Cofield, associate artistic director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, the debut of *Memnon* is a major achievement, at once grandly reminiscent of its roots and yet perfectly aware of our contemporary sensibilities—although when one expects to be immersed in the wonders of Greek drama, to have it presented in an 80-minute intermissionless format is a bit of a surprise.

The production is austere but cleverly conceived, beautifully augmented by set designer Riw Rakkulchon's versatile scaffolding lit by Brandon Baruch and featuring Yee Eun Nam's projections and Celeste Jennings's whimsical costuming which combines classic designs with everything from distressed cargo pants to camouflaged Skechers.

Tiffany Rae-Fisher's choreography is also a redolent asset, as is the dynamic fight direction by Emmanuel Brown, especially in the pivotal battle sequence between Memnon and Achilles (Eric Berryman and Jesse Corbin) that several times smoothly slows down into something akin to filmic *Matrix*-inspired moments.

The ensemble is generally up to the task, although I would hope after opening night the performers might

settle into something more uniformly successful. As is, the actors' ability to make their characters seem real as they work within the boundaries of the classical style—as well as simply to conquer the vocal challenges of the Getty's outdoor space—is extremely uneven and too often could possibly actually be hampered by the parameters of their technique training.

The clear exception is Daniel Jose Molina, who as both Polydamas and Antilochus easily commands the stage, delivering one lengthy monologue filled with expository information with the most charismatic of storytelling athleticism and with the ability to project his voice to the very back of the bleacher seating—a gift perhaps strengthened by his five seasons performing with Oregon Shakes.

Still, it's quite exciting to see Will Power's ambitious and daring homage to ancient drama thrust full force into our modern methods of commemorating all things theatrical—and there's no place in the Southland more a quintessential venue to present *Memnon* than the magnificent Getty Villa Museum amphitheater where hopefully such wondrous projects will continue to come to fruition for many generations to come.

THROUGH SEPT. 28: Getty Villa Museum, 17985 Pacific Coast Hwy., Pacific Palisades.

310.440.7300 or www.getty.edu

The Civility of Albert Cashier



Photo by Ashley Erikson

Colony Theatre

New and basically untried musicals are always scary, especially when the creators are trying to walk the perilously thin line between entertainment and a social conscience. Luckily for Angelenos, the current resident hopeful at the Colony Theatre, *The Civility of Albert Cashier*, is a perfect example of how to do both.

Cashier was indeed a real person, a young Irish immigrant settled in Belvidere, Illinois who in 1862 at age 18 enlisted in the 95th Illinois Infantry to fight with the Union Army against the Confederates.

At the time, the only physical exam required of young recruits, many not even old enough to shave, was for the recruiter to inspect their hands and feet—which was lucky for Cashier, who was harboring a secret well beyond not shaving. Underneath the modest farmhand clothing, the 110lb., 5'3" kid was actually born Jennie Hodgers.

Cashier was a loner, preferring not to share a tent with their fellow soldiers for obvious reasons, but before being mustered out in 1865 at the end of the war, they had marched with the 95th some 9,000 miles, fought valiantly in over 40 battles, and survived being captured and escaping back to their regimen under outrageously crafty circumstances.

It wasn't until 40 years later while hospitalized for dementia that Cashier's true gender was discovered and they soon were put on trial for defrauding the government by collecting their veteran's pension. No one believed the mentally diminished Cashier had really fought in the war until members of their former regiment came forward to testify not only on fighting shoulder-to-shoulder beside them, but how steadfastly and courageously their friend and fellow soldier had served.

There are so many things to love about *The Civility of Albert Cashier*, especially the remarkably infectious Dylan-esque score by Coyote Joe Stevens and Keaton Wooden, the emotionally affecting book and some additional lyrics by Jay Paul Deratany, and the kinetic and spirited direction by Richard Israel on Mark Mendelson's versatile roughhewn labyrinth of a set.

In an effort to make a full disclosure, I attended the first preview performance of *Albert Cashier*, partly as a guest celebrating the birthday of producer Christine Russell's cousin and our dear friend Leslie Bourne, partly due to my schedule when the production officially was set to open (this coming September 7).

Covering a preview is definitely not something I would usually do, but I did so with one clear understanding: if I was not enthralled, I would either not write a review or arrange to return after opening night when I could better judge how things had fallen into place. If I did love the production, however, I would do exactly what I'm doing right here and now.

Simply, I loved it. Except for a few minor druthers, things that surely will be addressed during this final

week before the opening night, I feel more than able to promote an excellent and exciting new project.

Aside from some judicious sound balancing needing to be made between the orchestra and the vocals and some also correctable minor adjustments to the evenness of the performances, with Israel's guidance and a score that could make anyone soar, I have no doubt some mighty fine theatrical sorcery will be firmly in place by this weekend.

Both Dani Shay as the young Albert and Cidny Bullens as their older counterpart give arresting performances, glorious in their musical numbers and heartrending as the title character in the two different stages of their shared difficult but miraculous life navigating the unforgiving world in which they were forced to live in vaguely public hiding.

Shay is especially memorable with Albert's chest-puffing musical affirmation of their quest "I Gotta Try" and in contrast, Bullens breaks hearts with the older Albert's recurring requiem questioning their life choices called "What is Real."

Blake Jenner is a charmer as a conflicted young soldier puzzled by his blossoming feelings for his comrade-in-arms without knowing the true gender of his crush, as is Phillip J. Lewis as the older Albert's hospital attendant with his eye on a vaudeville career in the big city.

Both performers have their chance to shine delivering some of Stevens' and Wooden's best folk-tinged madrigals, Jenner in the sweetly lyrical ballad "Excuse Me Sir" and in a lovely duet with Shay called "The Perfect Home," while Lewis steps out in the bluesy showstopping treat "Chicago."

Cameron J. Armstrong is also a standout as H. Ford Douglas, a free Black man desperately wanting to join Albert's unit, a character who introduces a lovely, gossamer duet to love titled "Follow the Sound" and beautifully performed with Fatima El-Bashir as the absent wife he will never see again.

One huge production number featuring the entire ensemble of young soldiers and choreographed by Hayden J Frederick comes off as an unexpected homage to *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, something akin to performing an unlikely but instantly welcoming giant barn dance in the middle of a Civil War battlefield.

Although the castmembers in general are undeniably in varying stages of their professional careers and comfort zones, they all have one compelling thing in common: an amazingly thrilling commitment to the material and a collective ability, thanks to the evocative score and heartfelt book—not to mention Israel's directorial leadership—to by final curtain bring at least one world-weary and curmudgeonly old theatre critic to tears.

I suspect *The Civility of Albert Cashier*, although taking place so many years ago, could just about move the stoniest of hearts hardened by our contemporary mess of a society—unless you're one of those deluded zombie followers of the Tangerine Nightmare, of course, and who knows what planet those people are on.

It's a fascinating exploration into gender identity, the healing power of acceptance, and a clear plea for all of us to be civil to and embrace one another regardless of how anyone should choose to live their life.

THROUGH SEPT. 22: Colony Theatre, 555 N. Third St., Burbank. www.colonytheatre.org

Medea Comes to Our Town



Photo by Paul Hoan Zeidler

McCadden Place Theatre

I loved the reaction on social media when someone read that Tony Foster's new play, presented by the

Lightning Rod Theater Company and debuting at the McCadden Place Theatre, was called *Medea Comes to Our Town*.

On first glance, the reader posted with amusement at the folly, "I read it as *Medea Comes to Our Town*... by Thornton Wilder!"

Well, dearheart, that's exactly what it is. Welcome to the cunningly skewed Wonkaworld of Foster, whose work notably morphs from the linear to the nonlinear at the drop of a new thought and this one is hardly an exception.

Foster starts with Wilder's wildly popular Pulitzer Prize-winning 1938 classic play and takes it somewhere no one else could ever have imagined: aboard a time-traveling chariot dropped in the middle of 1909 Grover's Corners by none other than the title character in Euripides' classic-*classic* first performed in the 5th-century BC.

See, although *The Odd Couple* has a significant presence in Foster's love-hate ode to the history of theater, Neil Simon this is not. And as if to offer himself up as a sacrifice to anyone who finds his *Medea* blasphemous or simply too impenetrable to grasp, Foster himself bravely appears onstage playing Wilder's Stage Manager who traditionally narrates the tale. Along the way, he drops names of playwrights and play titles through the centuries in an almost dizzying assault, often presenting his own thrown-away critique of how they've held up in time.

Aside from more traditionally well-known and often over-performed plays, he wonders aloud from his perch on the sidelines if one *Noises Off* could justify a thousand *Moose Murders* or if the off-Broadway production of *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* had failed to teach us anything.

There are by my count, which may or may not have become compromised during the play's two-and-a-half hour running time, some 70-plus references to plays with varying degrees of notoriety and mentions of playwrights through the ages from Stoppard to David Auburn—including at least a couple of which I was chest-puffingly a part of their inception.

Alina Phelan (who Foster's Stage Manager admits to us was second choice for the role when Jennifer Coolidge got a movie) leads the cast as the resident Mrs. Gibbs, here simply called the Doctor's Wife. As is true with the now dated and rather simplistic original character, she is a seemingly contented housewife who dares not dream openly of a life beyond Grover's Corners but is secretly frustrated with her existence and wishes to see Paris before she dies.

When a breakfast argument between her feuding children (Kate Huffman and Sean Faye) leads to her daughter calling her baseball-obsessed brother a Neanderthal, the Doctor's Wife is quick to scold, "I won't put up with evolutionary talk in this house!"

Everything is upended in this bucolic small town when the world's first feminist *Medea* (Cherish Monique Duke) lands in the town square in her *deus ex machina*, fleeing her own ancient time period and

bypassing Athens with her trusty nurse (Lynn Odell) after murdering her children and destroying her husband Jason's life.

When the scorned former princess runs into the Doctor's Wife, everything the housewife knows is immediately upended. Medea tries to educate her new malleable friend in the wonders of carnal abandon, humping the family's dinner table in a scene that rivals Maya Lynne Robinson's 2017 performance in *Future Sex, Inc.* that I previously had acknowledged as the Best Onstage Orgasm ever. This moment alone could prove any future abbreviation of the play's title as *Medea Comes...* to be more than justifiable.

She also lends her hostess her chariot and persuades her to go on a journey forward to 1956 to attend the opening night performance of *My Fair Lady*. She misses the premiere but learns many other things about the world outside her insular town and the confining existence she has there, returning ready to set the place on its ear. Medea, however, has had the opposite revelation and is now more than content to stay in Grover's Corners and continue having a little romantic fling with the Doctor's son—which surely by its very nature must be a little more fun than a wooden table.

Jamie Robledo directs *Medea Comes...* (oh, I do love that) with great whimsy and imagination, keeping the action moving crisply when it could have gotten overpowered by Foster's rhetoric and complex sense of hyperbole. He quite cleverly aces moments that could be overwhelmed by the play's inherent theatricality, with Greek masks used to present a lighthearted short play-within-a-play version of Abe Burrow's *Cactus Flower* or creating Medea's chariot using a ghostlight to steer and actors seated between two large wheels to become the axle.

The cast is uniformly on target and completely willing to trust Foster and Robledo's vision. LA stage veterans Phelan and Duke are deliciously over-the-top and play off of one another splendidly, while Huffman and Faye have their own moments as the warring siblings as well as several other eclectic characters—she especially memorable as a New Yawk-accented chippie in a delightful Thalia-meets-Glenda Farrell mask and he portraying Hamlet's Ophelia stubbornly denying having committed suicide.

Odell is a gift as the aged nurse, particularly delivering a world-weary diatribe about the absurdity of life and what we call our "truth." Still, it's Foster himself who provides the glue that holds things together, at times exposing the nerdiness of being a lifelong theatre devotee and at other times bristling with frustration about whether the theatre itself could be as ridiculously meaningless as the rest of our perceived realities.

As both author and performer, Foster's ultimate message might be a little murky since it has so many points of view to mentally click on. Although he often celebrates all things theatrical and how from its earliest beginnings it has energized, chronicled, and helped direct the advancement of our species, particularly since the play is chockfull of the history and progression of the artform Foster obviously knows so well, *Medea Comes...* also asks if the whole thing we so wholeheartedly revere might be a bit of a crock.

From the iconoclastic juxtaposition of *Our Town*, which simply explored the meaning and mystery of life, with *Medea*, one of the earliest depictions of the violent and vengeful nature of human beings, Foster asks if theatre, like our very presence on this troubled planet itself, has any redemptive reason for existing in the first place.

As wonderful and even epic as *Medea Comes...* may be, however, I am compelled to offer a bit of tough love as well. It is a massive achievement but it's also in desperate need of judicious pruning.

When my own first play *Surprise Surprise* was mounted at the Victory Theatre Center in 1994, our director Hope Alexander joined in an intervention with the theatre's artistic directors Maria Gobetti and Tom Ormeny to get me to make cuts, something I staunchly refused to do; it was as though everything I had ever wanted to say had to be stuffed into one script in case I never had such an opportunity to say it again. A decade later, working on the screenplay for the film version, I chopped and diced without a moment's concern about losing my artistic voice.

I wish someone had been around to help turn this otherwise incredibly promising masterwork into an intermissionless 90-minute piece because as is, the indulgences of *Medea Comes to Our Town* dilute and seriously take away from its mission.

Still, Tony Foster's brilliance as a wordsmith and scholarly knowledge of theatre is something to be applauded and shared. If I were teaching my usual Great Plays and Playwrights class this semester, I'd bring my students to the McCadden Place Theatre to see a most prodigious, thought-provoking, and downright hilarious dissertation on the nature of what I believe is the world's most enduring and ultimately important artform.

THROUGH SEPT. 22: McCadden Place Theatre, 1157 N. McCadden Pl., LA.

lightningrodtheater.ludus.com

Reefer Madness



Photo by Andrew Patino

The Reefer Den at the Whitley

"Creeping like a Communist! It's knocking at our doors! / Turning all our children into hooligans and whores!"

It's a dire warning received when entering the newly created Whitley Theatre, the imaginative new incarnation of the many-times reinvented old King King Nightclub on Hollywood Boulevard, when you arrive to hear a lecture about the evils of that new scourge threatening the children of America. You know, that demon weed called marijuana—which one of the participants in a conspiratorial and somewhat disgusted tone reminds us is a "Mexican" word.

As the lecturer (a stone-faced Bryan Daniel Porter) sermonizes about the new drug's destructive and soul-crushing properties, his eager ensemble of equally concerned cohorts helps deliver his stern message of evil and avarice by recreating a recent incident of a real life ruination: the downfall of decent young suitably geewillikersy teenager Jimmy Harper (Anthony Norman) at the hands of a smarmy true monster named Jack (also played by Porter).

The time is 1937, folks, and the place is the Good Ol' USA in this smashing revival of *Reefer Madness*:

the Musical, produced by the 2005 film version's stars Christian Campbell, Kristen Bell, and Alan Cummings, as well as the film's original director Andy Fickman, its bookwriter/composers Kevin Murphy and Dan Studney, Campbell's producing partner/wife America Olivo, and executive producer Wendy Parker.

It might seem like a major risk, presenting this elaborate recreation of a cult icon during our current crisis attempting to restore live theatre back from the depths of audience apathy after being crushed by the pandemic, especially when the spoils have to be shared by so many creators, but I doubt if financial gain was the main goal this dedicated group of artists thought about when they decided to bring it back. Still, considering how spectacularly and inventively *Reefer Madness* has returned to the town where it modestly began 25 years ago, in a fair world this production could play on to packed houses in the newly renamed Reefer Den for a long time to come.

That original production, which played right down the street at the tiny Hudson Theatre on Santa Monica Boulevard, was also directed by Fickman and starred Campbell, launching their careers in the nicest way possible. It went on to snag seven LA Drama Critics Circle Awards for 1999, for Best Production, Direction, Score, Choreography (by a 28-year-old Michael Goorjian, no less), Musical Direction, Sound Design, and a well-deserved Leading Performance Award for Campbell, who was also honored as Best Actor in a Musical from my own annual TicketHolder Awards.

Of course, the source of the musical spoof was another cult classic, the outrageously bad 1936 dead-serious instructional film *Tell Your Children!*, a project financed by a church group intending it to be shown to god-fearing Christian parents as a tool to teach them about the dangers of cannabis use..

Soon after it was produced, however, and realizing quickly how unintentionally funny it was, it was purchased by producer Dwain Esper and re-cut to be distributed on the exploitation film circuit, its horrifically bad filmmaking and acting, as well as its inherent randiness and vulgarity, escaping censorship under the guise of offering valuable moral guidance.

It was rediscovered again in the late 60s and enjoyed a copious new resurrection from my generation, who had another reaction to its message—one I remember personally quite vividly as my partner Victor and I sat in the living room of Jim Morrison and Pamela Courson watching a screening of the film unfold through a thick smoky haze while tripping on two tabs of Clear Light.

What this all-new take brings to this rich history is everything that conspired to make it fresh again and to do so in the classiest way possible, especially by hiring the multi-award winning Spencer Liff, two-time Emmy nominee for TV's *So You Think You Can Dance?*, to direct and choreograph. His vision, surely fostered by those original participants with such a fond past with the evolution of the musical, is the heart and soul of this production and his ensemble cast is uniformly onboard in the effort.

Both Norman and Porter (who also plays FDR and a Jesus even more irreverent and lots more colorful than on *South Park*) are exceptional, even when Jimmy's horrific (comedic) decline into addiction and

madness was hampered on opening night by a temperamental headworn microphone that became so problematic the performance had to take a brief little unexpected intermission.

Thomas Dekker is hilarious throughout as Ralph Wiley, the addicted fallen fratboy whose promise as a future nuclear scientist has dissolved into sentences that end with “whoops... it’s gone” and J. Elaine Marcos is comic perfection as the blowsy Sally DeBain, who quiets her ever-howling newborn infant by blowing marijuana smoke into its baby bottle.

Darcy Rose Byrnes is delightful as Jimmy’s love interest Mary Lane, who goes from a potential steady girlfriend in the Andy Hardy tradition to a scantily-clad vixen with a single toké on one of Jack’s funny cigarettes.

Still, of all the principals, Nicole Parker is a true standout as Jack’s once respectable moll Mae Coleman, whose former family home has become her dealer boyfriend’s “den” and center of his operations. Mae’s continuous wailing to reform and clean herself up is thwarted by even a look at one of Jack’s pre-rolls, making her ballad “The Stuff” one of the musical highlights of the show.

The ensemble of wonderfully game dancer/singers could not be better, performing Liff’s incredibly athletic moves throughout the production’s inventive environmental cabaret staging, where arms and legs often slice through the air so close to the heads of patrons seated at nearby tables that one can feel the wind they generate.

May I make a special shoutout to Patrick Ortiz, who stepped in at the performance we saw for dancer Alex Tho and, particularly since he’s not listed in the printed program as one of the swings, presumably learned Tho’s physically demanding track in record time and did an excellent job of making it his own.

The set and interior Reefer Den design by Mark A. Dahl and Peter Wafer is incredibly clever, enhanced by the lighting design by Matt Richter and what could easily become future award-winning costuming by drag clown Pinwheel Pinwheel.

As the action happens all around the patrons seated at those tables, the waitstaff delivering food and drink (including such treats as nachos piled on psychedelic-green tortilla chips and chicken skewers piercing the ceramic heads of Aphrodite and Michelangelo’s David) are forced to gingerly dodge performers rushing from one place to another. There’s continuous chaos happening everywhere one looks and it’s quite impressive that it all happens so seamlessly.

Above everything, however, the true star of the show is once again the infectious score and quick-witted tongue-in-cheek lyrics created by Murphy and Studney, an Emmy-winning feat that stands up in time splendidly and the exceptional contributions of sound designer Charles Glaudini and the venue’s live band led by musical director David Lamoureux enhance that goal immeasurably.

Truly, this return to the hysterical raucousness of *Reefer Madness* could not be more welcome as our country fights its conservative-led return to what Trump-era *Republican*s and other naysayers see as the

demise of traditional “family values”—and the current over-the-top exaggerations and risqué nature of the musical’s original campiness make it better than ever before, especially since today you don’t have to hide in the corner of the parking lot to indulge illegally in any enhancers to appreciate its slickly produced silliness.

EXTENDED THROUGH OCT. 27: The Reefer Den at the Whitley, 6555 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood.
www.reefermadness.com

Topsy Turvy



Photo by Ashley Randall

Actors' Gang Theatre

Founded by Oscar-winning film star Tim Robbins 42 years ago and still active under his continuing leadership, the Actors' Gang has produced more than 150 plays in LA and has toured 40 states and five continents in its mission to honor the sacred heritage of live theatre by introducing unconventional new works and creating exciting reinterpretations of the ancient classics.

It's been a little bit David Lynch, a little bit what the company calls “The Style,” and a whole lot of worshipful homage to the 15th-century traditions of Commedia dell'arte that conspire to energize the Gang and simply, nobody does it better.

Starting its journey in garages, art galleries, street corners, and late night takeovers of small venues, the

company's unswerving search for theatrical windmills has never wavered—that is until the pandemic put a major obstacle in their path as they strive to create, educate, and inspire through their art.

Although the Gang members continued to try to adapt their workshops and educational outreach programs to online formats, Robbins could not shake the sense that something vital was missing. From that came *Topsy Turvy (A Musical Greek Vaudeville)*, now world premiering at the Gang's theatre for a limited run before heading off to the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in Romania, certainly with more international tour dates to follow.

Written and directed by Robbins—his 15th original play to debut at his theatre since 1982—the roots of *Topsy Turvy* sprout both from classic Greek theatre and the deliciously lowbrow tenets of burlesque.

As the unity of a 10-person modern Greek chorus is upended due to a widespread pandemic that keeps them from being able to meet in person, they turn to the gods—you know, the old ones with names like Dionysus and Aphrodite—to seek their wisdom and help mend the divisiveness in their ranks destroying their ability to harmonize.

Explains Robbins of his inspiration: “What was missing was what theatre reliably provides, a place of gathering and community. The Gang could not meet in its shared space... and for some, there was something tragic and wrong about their theatre being closed, something ominous and unsettling about gathering places all around the world being shuttered.”

The result is *Topsy Turvy*, limning that overwhelming sense of loss many of us are still experiencing four years later. It is one of the earliest theatrical responses to the experience that took such a huge chunk out of our lives and as so, presented in the usual-unusual *modus operandi* for which the Gang has become known, nothing and no one is left without a voice, from the unnerved members of the chorus to the gods themselves.

Robbins also strikingly directs his latest international-bound project, leading a wildly game cast of zanies who are, as always, fearless in their willingness to go beyond the bounds of any restraint in creating their characters, this fearlessness the outcome of working together in the Gang's rule-challenging ongoing workshops.

The members of the chorus searching to “find the virtue in loneliness” are each distinctive, presumably developed from being given the freedom to bring their individual roles to life from the first gasp of artistic birth. And together, their musical moments are also quite impressive.

Although a musical director is not officially credited, I would suspect another Robbins, brother David Robbins, who has created, performed, arranged, and designed the sound for many of the troupe's productions since 1985 (even contributing improvised musical accompaniment for the Gang's workshops), should be acknowledged here for helping the chorus find their perfect harmonies.

The talent must run in the family as sister Adele Robbins, herself a 30-year member of the company, is

an eager member of the chorus here and, aside from writing and directing *Topsy Turvy*, the overachieving Tim has also composed six exceptionally evocative songs and lyrics for his “musical vaudeville.”

As the summoned gods who interrupt the frustrated members of the chorus in danger of losing their moxie and no longer able to “find meaning in distraction,” Luis Quintana and Scott Harris are special standouts as the Vegas lounge-like comedy team of Cupid and Bacchus, the latter gleefully noting that since the lockdown began there’s never been a time when wine has been more appreciated.

Harris also proves his versatility doubling in the more serious role of the Biblical character Onan and as Dionysus, arriving to blast our species for the systematic destruction of our planet—and prompting a chorus member to point out that “all the gods seem so grouchy.”

Perhaps the most chilling indictments of human behavior which has directly caused the *Topsy Turvy* nature of our world we live in comes from Guebri Van Over as Aphrodite and a dynamic showstopping turn by Stephanie Galindo as Aztec goddess Coatlique, who accuses us all of our planet’s impending destruction and near distinction of our Native American ancestors.

Quintana, back as aptly named Barnum-esque master of ceremonies Distracto, leads a raucous troupe of street-style carnival magicians, hypnotists, and particularly Megan Stogner as a wonderfully entertaining monkey anxious to escape from her cage. All contribute to bring welcome comic relief to lighten up the proceedings between the sharply accusatory monologues by gods and others shaming our species for the rampant disregard of our planet and the responsibility of creating a “society in chaos, a society that has lost its sense of up and down.”

If there’s anything to criticize in this impressive and freshly innovative production, it might only be a sense that, between the circus-like comedic interludes, the harsh diatribes delivered to the audience by the gods begin to feel a bit like too much sermonizing. I believe this is only something noteworthy here in *Topsy Turvy*’s Los Angeles debut where, especially considering the general hipness of the Actors’ Gang devoted audiences, the issues raised seem to be preaching to the choir.

Robbins notes that the themes and warnings present in his latest opus are “intended as a catalyst for a conversation” and I kept thinking as it was unfolding how much its message will resonate, educate, and in a way apologize to the participants of the Romanian Sibiu Festival and to audiences anywhere it will subsequently travel.

“We are living in an aftermath of disorder and disarray,” Robbins explains of his quest for windmills. “Theatre is here precisely for these times. It has the potential to unite us. It can inspire laughter, bring us songs that touch our hearts, raise difficult questions and dichotomies, remind us of our shared humanity.”

In other words, art heals—and nothing could be more potentially healing than the fiercely creative magic generated by Tim Robbins and the invincible members of the Actors’ Gang.

UPDATE: After knockin’ em dead at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in Romania, the Malta

Theater Festival in Poland, and The Csokonai National Theater in Hungary, *Topsy Turvy* returns home triumphant!

RETURNING SEPT. 26 THROUGH NOV. 16: The Actors' Gang, 9070 Venice Blvd., Venice.

[310.838.4264](tel:310.838.4264) or theactorsgang.com

Crevasse



Photo by Matt Kamimura

Victory Theatre Center

In 1938, brilliant but discredited German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl came to Hollywood. Her mission was to attend per-arranged meetings with the most influential film industry executives, the same folks not interested in distributing her documentary *Olympia*, an epic film which commemorated the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin.

Despite the fact that her movie intentionally focused on the athletes of the Games and was purported to try to harbor peace and unity in our ever-conflicted world, particularly paying worshipful deference to our own American hero and four-time medal winner Jesse Owens, it was Riefenstahl's personal reputation

that thwarted her efforts to see her baby reach our shores.

The snub was basically the result of her infamous 1935 propaganda feature *Triumph of the Will*, clearly glorifying the potentially ominous events which had unfolded the year before in Nuremberg at the Nazi Party Congress, a gathering which celebrated its leader and the man who had commissioned Riefenstahl to make the film. Her *Triumph des Willens* chronicled a turning point for world politics attended by some 700,000 supporters of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler—you know, that pre-Trumpian maniac who promised to Make Germany Great Again.

When her planned visit came directly on the heels of *Kristallnacht* and after the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League took out a full page in the *Hollywood Reporter* criticizing her arrival and hinting at the rumor that Riefenstahl was the mistress of *der Fuhrer* himself, all but one of the meetings with the studio heads was cancelled. The only executive who did not jump ship was Walt Disney, something perhaps even more notable since he was the only one of the men who was not a Jew.

We're told that Riefenstahl wasn't happy about this turn of events in the world premiere of playwright extraordinaire Tom Jacobson's arresting two-hander *Crevasse*, now playing at the Victory Theatre Center co-produced by its director Matthew McCray in collaboration with the Victory's founder and artistic director Maria Gobetti.

Riefenstahl (Ann Noble) didn't much like the Faustian thought of selling her "soul for Hollywood notoriety" in the first place, but when Disney, then mainly known as the creator of that red lederhosen-wearing rodent and struggling financially to keep his cartoon studio afloat, emerged from the rubble of her visit as the only person willing to meet with her, she was ready to skedaddle right back to the Homeland.

It was her manager Ernst Jeager (Leo Marks) who persuaded her to stay, reminding his client that the "Michael Mouse Club" had more members than the Hitler Youth. Although she saw the proposed meet-and-greet as akin to a "funhouse mirror facing true reality," she reluctantly agreed to stay.

Marks also plays Disney, as well as Hitler's Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, while Noble appears as Jeager's doomed Jewish wife Lotte and also briefly as an FBI official interrogating him. Both stunningly gifted performers send their already soaring individual recognition as two of our town's finest actors into the stratosphere with this auspicious debut of one of Jacobson's best and most fascinating plays.

Noble and Marks' rapid onstage transformations between these characters and the play's many locations are smoothly accomplished thanks to McCray's incredibly fluid staging winding through set designer Evan Bartoletti's series of shimmering gossamer draperies, possibly meant to subtly conjure the symbolic image of a glacial *Crevasse*, a deep crack in the ice that here evokes the real life moment when the cool and stiff-backed Midwestern demeanor of Walt Disney was potentially melted by the fiery and seductive ambitions of Leni Riefenthal.

Azra King-Abadi's striking lighting, Michael Mullen's provocative costuming, Nicholas Santiago's clever

but ghostly projections of Bambis and dwarves and bald mountains, and especially John Zalewski's metallic *Metropolis*-esque sound plot, beautifully augment this bareboned but highly evocative production, while from somewhere below the expert razzle-dazzle emerges a rather scary tale of the potential selling of one's soul and abandoning one's ethics in return for wealth and success.

Perhaps the most shocking and frightening image I'm left with might be Marks as the milquetoast but later well-known anti-Semite Disney, sometime after Riefenstahl has asked him if he's a "puppet of Hollywood or a real boy," hiding behind a stuffed toy of his famous Mouse and doing his beloved creation's signature voice while raising one plush arm at an angle as he intones "*Sieg Heil*."

Hollywood is, as Tom Jacobson reminds us, a place where the creation of art and beauty is expensive—and in his *Crevasse*'s final tableaux, featuring Disney sitting alone under a desk lamp as he picks up the red-covered copy of *Mein Kampf* Riefenthal has left him, the suggestion of the abandonment of one's ideals in the face of the profitability of pure evil could not be more disturbing.

What an ominous business model for the creation of the world's greatest and biggest motion picture and theme park empire Hitler's autobiographical manifesto might have been—something our current returning equally malevolent candidate for President is not at all skittish to embrace.

RETURNING OCT. 4 THROUGH OCT. 27: Victory Theatre Center, 3324 W. Victory Blvd, Burbank.
[818.841.5421](tel:818.841.5421) or thevictorytheatrecenter.org

Unassisted Reality



El Portal Theatre

Longtime Los Angeles weatherman Fritz Coleman retired in 2020 after four decades delivering his signature uncannily cheery forecasts on a daily basis but at age 76, his new solo show *Unassisted Residency*, which plays once monthly at the El Portal's intimate Monroe Forum, proves he's still got the chops to deliver a jocular and lighthearted tsunami to his eager and most loyal fans.

Coleman began his career coming to LA to pursue his passion for standup comedy in the early 80s after first achieving success as a well-loved deejay radio personality in Buffalo, New York.

As the story goes, a producer at NBC caught his act one night at a local club and began to woo him to become a weatherman at KNBC-TV since our weather here was so consistent that he felt it needed a little on-air boost of humor to make it more interesting.

Delivering the daily forecast with a twinkle in his eye beginning in 1984 didn't stop Coleman from continuing to chase his original dream by performing on local stages in several successful live shows, including his hilarious award-winning turn in *The Reception: It's Me, Dad!* which played around town for several years to sold out houses.

Now, after leaving NBC four years ago, Coleman is back but the demographics have changed—or I might politely say... matured.

In my own case, as someone a year older than Coleman, his focus on finding the humor in aging is most welcome. In *Unassisted Residency*, the comedian talks about the challenges life has to offer in these, our so-called golden years, from physical deterioration to losing contemporaries on a regular basis to navigating the brave new world of technology and social media.

As his opening warmup act, the very funny and professionally self-deprecating Wendy Liebman notes, while looking out at the sea of gray hair and Hawaiian camp shirts in their audience, that Coleman chose to present his show as Sunday matinees so his target audience can shuffle our drooping derrières on home before dark.

Along the way, he also tackles subjects such as retirement communities, nonstop doctors' appointments, incontinence, and Viagra, not to mention having grown up sucking in our parents' omnipresent clouds of secondhand tobacco smoke and that generation's lackadaisical attitude toward our safety and our health, all before moving on discuss to his all-new admiration for those heroic modern educators who during the pandemic had the patience to deal with zoom-teaching his grandkids.

The one thing he doesn't talk much about is the weather—that is beyond mentioning how grateful he is that our current heat wave didn't deter those gathered from venturing out of our caves and offering as a throwaway that one of the reasons he retired four years ago was climate change. Although he never says it, he doesn't really have to; we get that even for someone as funny as Coleman, everyone has their limits when it comes to the potentially catastrophic future for our poor misused and abused planet.

Then when he launches into reminiscing about the amazingly incessant search for sexual gratification in our younger years (that time Stephen King once wrote when the males of the species all look at life through a spermy haze) and how that has changed since then. As a now single guy still looking for love—with some choice remarks about online dating sites—he tells a rather steamy tale about one date that proves it ain't over 'til it's over, something of which I can definitely relate.

I first met Coleman in 1988 or 1989 when I did a feature interview with him as a cover story for *The Toluca* (the more industry-oriented and less Evening Women's Club-ish-pandering predecessor of the *Toluca Times*).

He was gracious and charming and kept me laughing so hard back then that I couldn't take notes fast enough, a knack he not only hasn't lost but has sharpened considerably over the past 40 years. I couldn't help wondering how many of the audience members at the Forum have been following him since then and for whom the topic of not-so gently aging hits home as dead-center as it did me.

This doesn't mean you have to be 70-something to appreciate Fritz Coleman's hilarious gift for creating homespun storytelling in his ever-extending monthly outing called *Unassisted Residency*.

Although my partner Hugh, who was quite literally at least three decades younger than anyone else in the audience last Sunday and is a mere 42 years my junior, laughed longer and louder than anyone else in the audience—perhaps a reaction to hearing me bitch continuously about getting old for the last 12 years?

EXTENDED TO OCT. 20 and NOV. 10: El Portal Monroe Forum Theatre, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., NoHo. www.elportaltheatre.com/fritzcoleman.html

See? I'm an angel.

