

From a Red "A" to SpongeBob

Bas Bleu explores sexual and societal repression in *The Scarlet Letter*.

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Given how far removed the sexual mores of 2005 are from those of 17th century New England, one might wonder what the point is of staging a play based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It's the familiar tale of Hester Prynne, a Boston woman who, after her husband's long absence, eventually has an affair resulting in the birth of an illegitimate daughter, and refuses to reveal the identity of the father. Prynne barely escapes the gallows—a not atypical punishment for adultery in those days—and she is instead forced to wear an enormous red "A" sewn to her clothing.

Pretty archaic stuff, it would seem, in this era of butt cleavage, "Desperate Housewives" and those odious Cialis commercials featuring jubilant, gray-haired couples reclining in hammocks, presumably having just enjoyed an 80-year-old boner together. In an era when no perversion is so twisted you can't instantly find 10,000 fleshy, slippery or neighing websites devoted to it, adultery as a crime punishable by death seems a quaint notion.

But of course it's not that simple. Sexuality in America has always been a contradictory beast with two backs. To wit: Abstinence-only "education" got a multi million dollar boost in the Bush administration's 2005 budget. Just last year a 40-year-old woman's partially exposed breast in Houston caused even older men in Washington to act like freaked-out six-year-olds. And closer to home, the adorable James Dobson, on his dotty quest to make both Coloradans and Christians look like gibbering idiots, takes issue with a cartoon character's supposed sexual orientation.

Clearly, the dark heat of sexuality—and perhaps more importantly, the emotions that surround it—are more complicated than we would like to let on, in the cold light of morning.

Director Peter Anthony's production explores the guilt, anxiety and jealousy that guide the

classic story, first published in 1850. Anthony's ethereal, creepy music and set design—impressively brought to grim fruition by scenic artist Sotirios Livaditis—capture the brooding sense of sickness and self-loathing at the heart of any society that pretends to the puritanical.

This Boston seems to be a place of death from the very beginning. The town cemetery dominates downstage, strangled by dying weeds, the colors largely washed-out greens and browns, except for a splash of red roses climbing up one side of an enormous portal directly upstage center, the prison door where Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl first appear.

All of which make Pearl's red dress and Hester's red letter trimmed with gold even more vibrant. Indeed, Pearl herself is the most attention-grabbing aspect of playwright Phyllis Nagy's update of the novel, first presented by the Denver Center Theatre Company in 1994.

Nagy's notes are very specific: The actor playing Pearl must be an adult "...who at no time attempts to play her as a child." This is tricky; Pearl narrates the play, but she is also Hester's 7-year-old daughter throughout, a child who cuts through the deceptions of the adults around her whenever she interacts with them. She is wise and innocent at once, a complicated role that could easily be rendered cartoonish if not handled deftly. Luckily, Fort Collins theatre veteran Flavia Florezell is up to the task. She treats the demands of this pivotal character with care, dancing lightly along this tightrope with an apparent ease and fluidity.

Heather Lawrence-Wescott plays Hester with a vulnerability that is almost devastating to witness at times. We are fully empathetic to Hester's plight; her persecution has left her emotionally flayed in a way that Lawrence-Wescott brings out truthfully.

The first time she embraces Dimmesdale—perhaps the first time Hester has felt an adult human's touch during the course of her seven-



A scene from *the Scarlet Letter*

year punishment—the sense of reprieve from her awful aloneness, the sheer naked need for human contact that is released in her sigh is like an exhaled rainbow momentarily coloring her drab world.

The choice to lean so heavily towards Hester's vulnerability, however, may have obscured another aspect of the character's personality. As written, Hester not only *takes* her punishment, she *embraces* it—she spits in the eye of a repressive society. She takes power from those who would judge her: She embroiders her scarlet "A" with gold thread, wears it proudly and defies the governor's demands that she name Pearl's father.

To hold out as a pariah for seven years would require a spine of steel and a fearlessness hard to imagine. That strength peeks out from time to time, but it is not at the forefront of Lawrence-Wescott's performance.

As the loathsome Chillingworth, Marlin May admirably gives us a multi dimensional, nuanced man, even finding humor in the cracks between the cuckold's bitter ragings. May was a late addition to the cast, a last-minute replacement who only had a dozen or so rehearsals prior to opening, but he needs no excuses. His Chillingworth rings true; he is authentic and human, albeit warped by jealousy.

The guilt Brian Hughes employs in playing the pale, nearly translucent Reverend Dimmesdale would make my mother weep tears of joy into her matzoh ball soup. He is a man wracked, tormented and tortured, and if his periodic outbursts of anger or frustration seem a bit abrupt or out of step with his usual shell-shocked frailty, it works for him, taken in context. He is a man struggling to hold in his metaphorical guts after being eviscerated. It isn't pretty when they spill out.

An unexpected treat is Rebecca Spafford's portrayal of Mistress Hibbins. It's a relatively minor character but Spafford is magnetic as the unapologetically salacious witch, teasing Chillingworth and playing the foil to her brother the governor (a perfectly pompous Charlie Ferrie).

Maybe Americans are still just as conflicted about sex today as we were 300 years ago. If nothing else, this play works nicely as a mirror in which to view our repressive and ignorant tendencies.

Maybe someone should send a pair of tickets to the good Reverend Dobson. 🍷

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The Scarlet Letter runs Friday and Saturday nights at 7:30 p.m. through March 26 with Thursday night performances on March 10, 17 and 25 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2:30 p.m. on February 27, March 13 and 20. Tickets are \$17 for adults, \$12 for seniors and \$10 for students and can be purchased at 970/498-8949 or online at basbleu.org. The theatre is located at 401 Pine St. in Fort Collins.