

Director Peter Anthony Pulls It All Together in "The Scarlet Letter"

By Kate Forgach

A director can have a fascinating script, impeccable sets and a talented cast, but if a key actor drops out shortly before opening night, he enters the sixth circle of theater hell.

That's the calamity that faced Bas Bleu Theatre's production of "The Scarlet Letter" two weeks before their Feb. 18th curtain rise. So what did director Peter Anthony do? He called upon the actor who can memorize lines at the drop of a hat and consistently create distinctive and indelible characters, he called Marlin May.

Truly, May deserves major kudos for ensuring the show went on. But his magic act would have been for naught had he not been working with gifted actors.

That this cast is so perfectly meshed is what differentiates this production from many other Peter Anthony works. A veteran of countless local plays, Anthony has earned a reputation for many peccadilloes. So much so that there is a game known as "Peter Anthony Bingo." The first player to spot a "woman thrown to ground" earns a square. Another square goes to "ramps used in a set;" another for video screens on stage," etc.

But Anthony is not commonly known as an "actors director." His primary focus is not working the

Stanislavsky method through with each actor, or knitting a cast together.

That's not to say Anthony's not a highly skilled director; he's one of the best we've got and audiences look forward to his unique interpretations. What makes "The Scarlet Letter" so delightful is that it combines the best of Anthony's technical talents with a focus on his actors' performances.

His choice of dramas was excellent. Playwright Phyllis Nagy's modern adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic draws out the author's sexual and sensual themes.

The basic story remains the same, but for the sake of those for whom high school is a distant memory, let's review.

Set in the prissy Puritan years in Boston, Hester Prynne (Heather Lawrence-Wescott) is a young woman who has been sent from England to await the arrival of her older husband, Roger Chillingworth (May). After two years with no word, Prynne has an affair with the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale (Brian Hughes) and gives birth to the wild child, Pearl (Flavia Florezell).

The Puritans condemn Hester to wear a scarlet "A" on her breast. Chillingworth returns in disguise to seek his revenge upon the father. The clergyman politely obliges by falling ill under the weight of his guilt. And so the scene is set.

They key to Nagy's accessible update is replacing Hawthorne's original narra-

tor with the wickedly mischievous and quick-witted Pearl. The child is played by an adult, although her character vacillates from infant to seven-year-old to adult. As a result, Hawthorne's underlying sensuality and sexuality is brought to the surface. It also may be easier for audiences to apply more modern interpretations to much of the original symbolism and metaphors.

Florezell plays Pearl as pure id. Her child hides nothing, speaks unvarnished truths and walks a fine line between monster and modernity. Dressed by Costume Designer Rebecca Spafford in a scarlet gown shot with gold that reflect's the hand-sewn "A", she is the physical and spiritual embodiment of her mother's punishment.

Lawrence-Wescott's Prynne is the perfect blend of feminist flair and motherly love. Her transformation into a seductress is a natural balance to the reverend's sexual timidity. Our emotion dissolves from amusement to sympathy when she bodily throws herself at her one-time lover. "Take me!" she begs. "Where?" the naïve fool responds.

Her love for the

weak-hearted Dimmesdale is difficult to comprehend in the first act, as Hughes shifts from exhaustion to angry outburst in unconvincing segues. But he soon calms and the remorse that tears his soul unto death becomes a seamless part of the whole.

This is indeed a well-knit cast. Charlie Ferrie as Governor Bellingham, Greg Clark as Master Brackett and Rebecca Spafford as Mistress Hibbins round out an excellent cast. They're supported by one of Anthony's loveliest sets, constructed by Master Carpenter Brandon Ingold, with the help of Scenic Artist Sotirios Livaditis. The framed shadow box at deep center stage is a particularly inspired design. Along with Toni Alexander's lighting designs, we are treated to moving Vermeer paintings.

Photo by William A. Cotton



Heather Lawrence-Wescott as Hester Prynne and Marlin May as Roger Chillingworth

"The Scarlet Letter" continues at Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St., through March 26. Friday and Saturday performances are 7:30 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2:30 p.m. All tickets are \$17 for adults, \$12 for seniors and \$10 for students. Call 970.498.8949 or visit www.basbleu.org.