

Waiting for Godot



LOS ANGELES TIMES

A 'Godot' That Hears Beckett's Silent Scream

Samuel Beckett devotees should relish "Waiting for Godot" at the Raven Playhouse. Director J. Wienckowski and a youthful cast invest this silent movie approach to Beckett's absurdist benchmark with notable devotion. An archon of the avant-garde since its 1953 Paris premiere ate the Theatre de Babylone, "Godot" is perhaps the 20th century's most influential play, seminally affecting Edward Albee and Harold Pinter, among countless others. Wienckowski reverently observes Beckett's specifics like a conductor reading a classic score. (David C. Nichols)

LA WEEKLY

The meaning of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett's landmark 1953 absurdist work has been debated and analyzed for decades, though Beckett himself dodged any explanation — "If I knew, I would have said so in the play." It's better simply to bask in this darkly comedic contemplation on the tediousness of human life, the vicissitudes of class struggle and the farce of hoping. Despite a blown fuse that left the cast performing under glaring work lights, director J. Wienckowski and his young, adept ensemble redeemed the situation with a zany and bittersweet presentation reflected through the lens of a silent movie conceit — an apt milieu, given the play's rampant slapstick. On a lonely stretch of French country road, tramps Estragon (Eric Carter) and Vladimir (Brian Johnson), costumed like Laurel and Hardy, respectively, face another day of interminable and inexplicable waiting for the enigmatic Godot. While they meditate on the banality of their lives, the wealthy Pozzo (Chaplin-like Jay P. Africa) and his slave-attendant, Lucky (Ari Radousky), wander by, breaking the vagabonds' monotony while unwittingly helping them to reach a harrowing realization. All four are superb, as is Sarah Tarlow as Godot's anxious messenger boy, bearing tidings of small comfort and even less joy. (Martín Hernández)



Oedipus the King

A Vaudeville Musical

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Going Slapstick With Sophocles: Wacky 'Oedipus the King' views tragedy through absurdist lens.

It's raining seltzer water on Thebes in "Oedipus the King" at Theatre/Theater. This Sons of Beckett vaudevillian adaptation of Sophocles' deathless tragedy whips patricide, incest and manifest destiny into an uproarious blend of Tex Avery, Ernie Kovacs and National Lampoon.

Director Jeffrey Wienckowski goes for old-time music hall, instantly evident from Brian Johnson's set, Tim Watson's footlights and the barbershop house music. The Greek chorus of "OediPals" (composer-musical director Christopher P. Ellis, Kevin Ellis, Johnson and Marilyn Zaslow) are sublime. These ham-fisted harmonizers launch their insidious prologue with a glee that is blindingly funny.

So, mostly, is the show that follows, its twisted trajectory and fractured focus maintained by Wienckowski's costumes, arranger Heidi Kushnatsian's honky-tonk accompaniment and, certainly, the certifiable cast.

Jay Africa's Oedipus is an unflagging absurdist patsy, and the Winifred Shaw-flavored Jocasta, played by real-life spouse and choreographer Erin McBride Africa, defies rational analysis. The religious and sheep-tending factions of Richard-Edward de Vere and Eric Carter; Kelli Anne's cocktail waitress Euridice; and the inbred nightmare pair of Asia Garcia's Antigone and Anna Kennelly Baardsen's Ismene are all hysterical.

Wienckowski's blind Teireseas needs direction but fractures nonetheless, and, as the pickled Kreon, Chairman Barnes is a devastating comic find.

The savage climax can't be sustained without dropping comedy for Grand Guignol melodrama; how to reach a tragicomic resolution with the sick hilarity of a John Waters is an unsolved riddle.

Still, this goofball romp is surely the brightest deconstructed Grecian formula since Steven Berkoff's "Greek," which augurs well for its future. (David C. Nichols)



The Other Shore

(West Coast Premier)

CITY BEAT

Who's In Charge Here?

In a striking whirl of images 'The Other Shore' explores how leaders and followers interact

SOMETHING ABOUT THE avant-garde makes it suited to totalitarian societies. The tension between the official version of reality and life as it is actually lived is a fertile breeding ground for absurdity, and literal-minded censors often overlook imagistic or nonrepresentational forms of art. . The cast moves with ease and grace through Erin McBride Africa's often witty choreography. Standouts in the generally solid assembly include Elly Jaresko, a gifted dancer who also brings an impressive, subtle range, whether as the teacher of language, a prostitute, or a member of the crowd; Coati Mundi (compadre of Kid Creole), who adds his distinctive croak and musicianship to a number of roles; and Brian Johnson, who makes for an amiable schlemiel of an everyman. Jeffrey Wienckowski's direction brings as much drive and visual invention to the production as the awkward space at Theatre/Theater can hold. Scale is the only minus here. Something in The Other Show calls for the vast spaces and stark imagery of a Robert Wilson production, and both Wienckowski's images and Xingjian's themes need room to achieve their full impact. Still, what this production has accomplished on a limited budget and in an even more limited setting speaks volumes for this company's ambitions. (Patrick Corcoran Oct 30/2003)



BACKSTAGE WEST (Critic's Pick)

Nobel Laureate playwright Gao Xingjian employs a dizzying but riveting array of theatrical styles in this avant-garde work, which was banned in his native China due to its bold anti-Communist themes. One is initially drawn into to what appears to be a quintessential example of didactic Brechtian presentationalism. Before long, we decide it's closer to classic Beckett absurdism. Then subsequent segments with artfully stylized group movements and dance suggest the conventions of shadow plays or other Asian theatrical forms. This amalgam of diverse styles yields amazingly cohesive results, as eloquent symbolic imagery takes precedence over conventional narrative. Director Jeffrey Wienckowski and a splendidly agile ensemble illuminate Xingjian's timelessly compelling vision, a plea for human liberty and peace.

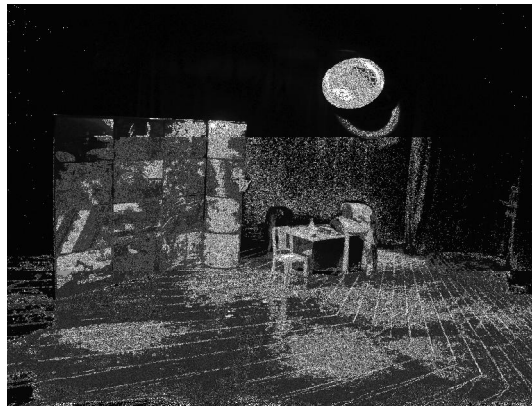
The abstract story charts a man's search for identity amid the oppressive sources that surround him. Wienckowski bookends the piece with impromptu-style segments in which the actors in a workout studio exercise, dance, laugh, and chat. The fourth wall is broken as a woman (Elly Jaresko) hands a spectator in the front row a long rope. Along with another actor (Jay Africa), she leads the cast in elaborate games in which they try to win rope-pulling competitions, demonstrating themes of power and manipulation.

These themes continue throughout the 90-minute show as the characters go on a desperate quest to cross a treacherous river, believing their exodus to the destination identified only as "the other shore" will bring elusive meaning to their individual lives. Jaresko's character initially takes the role of teacher and guide, but her fellow travelers soon rebel for irrational reasons and beat her to death. The power then shifts to the Man (Brian Johnson). He is tapped to rule the group, but he likewise encounters a series of obstacles to success. Though the scenes seldom progress in a logical fashion, the cumulative impact is alternately chilling and humorous. The dysfunctional interactions suggest the ill effects of political anarchy and the equally treacherous prospect of inefficient or self-serving rulers.

The spellbinding sense of surrealism in the actors' graceful movement, beautifully choreographed by Erin McBride Africa, as well as their crazed speech, work in effective counterpoint to the black-and-white simplicity of Jay Africa's unit set and Wienckowski's costumes. (Les Spindle Oct 9/2003)

Refraction

(World Premiere)



SAN DIEGO NEWS NETWORK

“Refraction” by Ronald McCants (is) a magical piece that confronted what it means to be an African American in this country at this time. This year’s play dances around the same theme, but it’s a lot more realistic, and even more unsettling. Nat (wonderfully grounded, centered Kyle Anderson, first-year MFA acting student) is a bona fide wunderkind. He was not only a star basketball player, and an accomplished photographer (his nature shots are the centerpiece of Colin McGurk’s set) but also an ace student, who snagged scholarships, a fine education and now, a high profile job working with the most troubled and difficult kids in a youth detention center. His cousin Paul has always lagged behind in Nat’s shadow, repeatedly getting in trouble, even serving a stint in prison... As events slowly unfold, we see that Nat isn’t the paragon of virtue that we thought; he is, in fact, a monster, who’s destroyed a number of lives along the way, all the while assuming the supercilious moral high ground. One might say that, as with refraction, as his light passes from himself to another, it bends; he’s bent, crooked, disturbed... This is a shocking piece of drama, about how the sins of one man can be passed along to many others, with long-term effects.

Pedophilia is a disease that seems to linger, transmitted infectiously for generations to come. First-year director Jeffrey Wienckowski helms an outstanding cast. (Pat Launer)

Everything Nice

(World Premiere)

SAN DIEGO NEWS NETWORK

“Everything Nice,” by third-year MFA playwright **Stephanie Timm**, is anything but nice. It’s timely and topical, haunting and unnerving. And it won’t get out of your head easily. The setting is a 20-year high school reunion. Two old BFFs meet up, not having seen each other since school. Ultra-thin, black-clad Annalise (Cate Campbell) is agitated, unable to forget what they did when they were last together. The victim was a girl who was bullying Annalise and spreading vicious rumors about her. The girls took revenge, brutally. The event haunts her every waking moment (she doesn’t sleep), makes her travel the world, aimlessly and obsessively, trying to escape from her past and her demons. Now, she wants to come clean, to confess all, to make amends. But Myra (Jennifer Putney) is having none of it. As the champagne flows, Annalise crumbles, falling prey to her terrors, her ghosts driving her to re-enact the original horrific event. This psychological thriller starts out pleasantly enough, and then grabs you by the throat and throttles you. The drama is brief, intense and unforgettable. Superbly performed (the other skilled actors are Taylor Shurte, Hannah Larson and Hugo Medina), and tautly directed by Jeffrey Wienckowski. Enter at your own risk: this one won’t leave you alone. And what exactly happens in the final moments may leave you guessing, wondering and may even keep you awake at night. (Pat Launer)



The Threepenny Opera

(UCSD MFA Thesis Production)



SAN DIEGO GAY & LESBIAN NEWS

"The Threepenny Opera" has a bite at UCSD

Now UCSD's Department of Theatre and Dance offers a biting production of the Brecht/Weill classic through Feb. 5 at the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre.

On and around Ian Wallace's enormous three-level jungle gym-like set stretching the entire width of the stage area, Brecht's thieves, beggars and harlots ply their respective trades in a London slum. The time is 1838 and Queen Victoria is about to be crowned. London is jammed with onlookers.

The denizens of Soho are ready. Jonathan Peachum (Zachary Martens) heads a group of beggars whom he costumes with sympathy-inducing debilities (and pockets 70% of their take); Jenny Diver (Anne Stella) runs a brothel; master criminal Macheath (Zachary Harrison), aka Mack the Knife, roams the area, taking what and whom he wants. Chief cop Tiger Brown (Mark Christine) is in Mack's corner, thanks to generous kickbacks.

As the show opens, Peachum's daughter Polly (Taylor Shurte) – who can't resist a bad boy – has met and casually agreed to marry Mack the Knife – in a stable, mind you, decorated with a faux Persian rug, furniture and dinnerware conveniently appropriated by Mack's henchmen.

After all, these are economically difficult and ethically slippery times, and people do what they must to survive. If that means betraying a trust, so be it, as Mack himself will soon find out.

Third-year MFA student Jeffrey Wienckowski's sure-handed direction keeps it all under control. "The Threepenny Opera" was unusual for its choice of characters – the lower class, used to satirize the Weimar bourgeoisie – but what gave it staying power was Weill's angular, sometimes atonal, often angry-sounding music, said to be an attack on Wagnerian opera.

Hurry – the show closes Saturday. (Jean Lowerison)

SDNEWS.COM

Theatergoers thrilled by full engagement of all the senses must rush to the University of San Diego's production of Bertolt Brecht's "The Threepenny Opera," with music by Kurt Weill and performed by UCSD Masters of Fine Arts students.

Created in 1928, "The Threepenny Opera" is what might be called "in-your-face" theater. It's big, bawdy and charged with the anger and attitude of angry, disenfranchised people, as timely as images from Cairo.

In Brecht's book, the underdogs are the petty thieves, beggars and prostitutes of London. UCSD's production is a colorful one, with scenic designer Ian Wallace's red light district cribs fully lining the walls. They are as many as five tiers high, festooned with ladders, a spiral staircase and a hangman's noose for the execution of Macheath, a.k.a. Mack the Knife (Zachary Harrison).

This piece allows MFA student director Jeffrey Wienckowski, along with his MFA creative team and student actors, to design and perform an iconic work that is so full of itself and was mined by musical creators since (think "Cabaret," "Sweeney Todd" and "Les Miserables").

If it has a flaw, the UCSD production is too busy (something constantly draws the eye from the action that moves the piece forward), but that is also part of its attraction. Purple and orange dominate Elisa Bezoni's amusing costumes (she puts Macheath in a purple wide whale pinstripe suit, dark red fedora and orange vest). David Corsello solves sound challenges, and Sarah Cogan lights the goings-on cogently. (Charlene Baldrige)

Solemn Mockeries

(World Premiere)



LA WEEKLEY

Richard Creese's new play about the Englishman William-Henry Ireland, having its world premiere in a production by Independent Shakespeare Company, studies a man who, when a boy, had schoolmasters who tried to persuade his father to withdraw him from school on account of him being so stupid. In Creese's account, a one-man confession by Ireland as performed by David Melville and directed by Jeffrey Wienckowski, Ireland was desperate to please his father -- a collector of artifacts and a Shakespeare enthusiast. He was so desperate that, at the age of 18, he concocted the technical means to forge documents, testimonials, letters to Queen Elizabeth and Anne Hathaway including a lock of Shakespeare's hair, and even play scripts penned in the Bard's hand. Melville's Ireland opens the play speaking amiably to the audience but as though testifying at his own trial, arguing that he never killed anybody, he never deceived a woman or a child. His crimes were literary, and his assault was on something we call authenticity. Ireland was so fearless a fraud, he "discovered" a "lost" play by Shakespeare named *Vortigern and Rowena*, and aimed to get it produced -- under Shakespeare's name, of course -- just to see if his own play could pass for one of Shakespeare's. Melville has an almost preternatural gift for wry understatement and comic timing. The story, thanks to the blend of play and actor, is brutally funny and brutally sad, summoning eternal questions about the distinction between what we know, and what we think we know. (Steven Leigh Morris)

Bright Swords

(World Premiere)



HUFFINGTON POST

"All I can say is WOW when thinking about Ryan Vincent Anderson in the tour de force, one man historical play, *Bright Swords*. A Geffen or Mark Taper worthy-drama, *Bright Swords* tells the epic story of Ira Aldridge, an African American actor who fled New York in 1825 to become a star on the European stage in London and helped changed the tide of slavery in the British Empire. Written by Ric Creese and directed by Jeff Wienckowski, this was Anderson's Fringe debut - and oh what a debut it was. A solid hour of weaving through decades of Aldrich's life in song and story without breaking a sweat or missing a beat. The most affecting drama at Fringe. (Xaque Gruber)

Much Ado About Nothing

LA TIMES

A Spirited Post War Much Ado in Griffith Park

A skirmish of wit attends “Much Ado About Nothing” in Griffith Park, and it proves a notable argument. Independent Shakespeare Company concludes its summer season with an agreeably quirky, riotously funny take on the Bard’s evergreen romantic comedy.

With a well-judged update to the end of World War II, director Jeffrey Wienckowski dives into the milieu, as an upstage radio blares a "News On the March" announcement of the victorious Don Pedro’s brigade returning to Messina (Chris Porter’s sound design, here big band, there Italian opera, and Amanda Lee's period costumes are assets throughout).

The subsequent tableau vivant to “Begin the Beguine” identifies the characters with economy, and suits the themes of gender politics and deception that permeate the work.

Company co-founders and real-life spouses Melissa Chalsma and David Melville make memorable mincemeat out of Beatrice and Benedick, perhaps Shakespeare’s most delightful squabbling soul mates unaware. Both display keen comic chops and spontaneity in the asides and ad-libs -- their twin appearances from the audience while eavesdropping on their coevals’ ruses are priceless -- without sacrificing nuance. Surrounding them is an appealing, gratifyingly diverse ensemble, occasionally over-broad but clearly having a grand time. Erwin Tuazon’s Claudio and Danny Brown’s Hero are youthfully charming, Napoleon Tavale’s Don Pedro appreciably understated, Danny Campbell’s Leonato and Joseph Culliton’s Antonio agreeably old-school.

As villainous Don John, William Elsmen infuses his menace with drollery; Richard Azurdia and Xavi Moreno are vivid as his henchman; and so forth, with André Martin’s word-mangling Dogberry and Thomas Ehas’ deadpan Verges approaching “Carry On” film territory.

Purists may bemoan the liberties taken, parents should be aware of mild lewdness, and the melodramatic histrionics at Hero’s wedding risk overkill. But the spirit of the piece is acute; at the reviewed performance, when Beatrice and Benedick finally embraced, the crowd roared its approval as one person. Grab a sweater, pack a picnic and go. (David C. Nichols)

