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GetBoulder.com Theater Reviews

Reviewer Beki Pineda is a 30-year veteran of the Denver theater scene as a former teacher and director. She has owned and operated All Propped Out, a theatrical prop rental house, and for 14 years reviewed theater for the former publication Time Out for Entertainment. She is a both professional theatergoer with a true love for the art and an unabashed theater groupie.

The WOW Factor for each production measures its worth against a perfect score of 10. Shows rated 7 and above are the ones Beki recommends.

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GIDION'S KNOT: Written by Johanna Adams; directed by Wendy Franz. Produced by square product theatre and Goddess Here Productions at the Diary Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., **through Jan. 18**. Tickets at squareproducttheatre.org.

A parent-teacher conference gets off to a rough start as the mother is not sure of the room and the teacher is sure she doesn't want to be there. The colorful fifth-grade classroom assumes an overlay of dread as the mother, Corryn, arrives to find out how her son, Gidion, is performing in school. In the conversation that ensues, information slowly leaks that reveals Gidion's involvement in an incident at school that prompted another tragic incident at home. A Gordian knot with no easy answers needs to be examined.

Tammy Meneghini as Corryn radiates anger and fear in her posture and in her polite questions issued through clenched teeth. When alone in the classroom, she wistfully looks for signs of her son—his desk, his work on the bulletin board, his art. Both seeking answers and fearing them, she relentlessly pursues her son's life at school with the determination of a pit bull. A teacher herself, she is positive that her son's teacher can provide insights into Gidion's behavior and accept blame for the results. Her grief is so palpable that the sound of children in the halls between classes stops her in her tracks.

Emily Harrison as the teacher, Ms. Clark, reeks of trepidation and insecurity at facing the anger of this woman alone. She is obviously charged as well with the responsibility of protecting the school from further damage. Her attempts to protect Corryn from knowledge of Gidion's actions finally give way to anger, and more facts emerge. Surprises and plot twists are sprinkled throughout the evening like little bombs going off in your heart. The differences between the two women—their expectations, their maturity of viewpoint, their unwillingness to accept blame—are illustrated by their reactions to a theme paper Gidion has written.

Gidion, the unseen third character, emerges as an 11-year-old with great sensitivity and an imagination that melds his real life with the mythic tales his mother teaches. He thinks so far outside the box as to render it nonexistent. He has a streak of brilliance, a need for justice, and a flair for the dramatic that would outshine both women. He creates a solution to his own Gordian knot that far exceeds the usual "cut it or untie it"

remedies.

This is a powerfully written piece that offers no easy solutions, and it is given voice by two powerful actresses who are so invested in this story that it is even difficult for them to smile at the curtain call. Not to be missed, and the run is short. Get on down there!

WOW factor: 9

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, The Radio Play—written by Joe Landry; directed by Robert Kramer. Produced by Miners Alley Playhouse (1224 Washington St., Golden) **until Dec. 22**. Tickets available at 303-935-3044 or www.minersalley.com.

A stellar cast has been gathered to give life to the familiar Christmas tale made famous by the Jimmy Stewart-Donna Reed movie. Five actors and a stage manager arrive in a radio studio to act out the script, complete with sound effects and musical interludes. What adds a new layer of fun to the evening is watching the actors cover up their mistakes, make the sound effects, and develop their personal relationships while vocally acting various characters in the radio script. Their backstage antics tell a completely different story than the one they're reading into their mics.

David Blumenthal plays the station owner Freddie Filmore, and also acts the parts of Mr. Potter, the villain in the radio play, as well as other voice parts. Jason Maxwell plays Clarence, the angel sent down to help George Bailey, our doubting hero, as well as other radio characters. His turn as one of the Bailey children gives him and Haley Johnson (playing Mary Bailey) one of the funniest bits of silent comic business I've ever seen. Johnson shines as Mary and as an actress with a crush on fellow actor Christian Mast. Her attempts to get his attention make a sweet subplot. Mast plays George Bailey to a T. In a touching dream sequence, he learns what the life of those he loves would have been like without him, and is surprised to see how much he contributed and how much he is loved. The final cast member is a very cute Samara Bridwell, who plays all the other female radio roles, including the femme fatale Violet.

Another holiday addition to the evening is the Christmas stories read by the cast members to the audience as they are arriving in the theater. A family-friendly Christmas treat just a short ride from Boulder!

WOW factor: 8.5

THE SEAFARER—Written by Conor McPherson; directed by Michael Stricker. Presented by Ashton Entertainment at the Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., **Dec. 6-21**. Tickets available at 303-444-7328 or www.thedairy.org.

Editor's note: This review is based on one Beki Pineda wrote after seeing the same production of THE SEAFARER, with the same cast, last spring in Denver.

May I just say upfront that this is the best play I've seen this year? There, I got that out of my system. It's a quiet little Irish piece that you will remember seeing for the rest of your life. It's the reason we go to the theater. It's bringing people together in a small room and telling a story in a way that impacts everyone who sees it.

Two brothers live together in a tiny flat in Dublin. As the tale commences, on Christmas Eve, we discover one brother, Richard (Steeff Sealy) dead drunk in the middle of the floor. We learn this is a fairly common occurrence as the other brother, Sharkey (John Ashton) comes downstairs to take care of him. As the morning progresses, we learn that Richard has been recently blinded during a drunken encounter with a Dumpster, and Sharkey is fresh out of prison with nowhere else to go. The breakfast dynamic between the two establishes the characters firmly in our minds, with Richard being the alpha dog but frustratingly helpless and Sharkey taking the caretaker role seriously and showing genuine concern for his abusive

brother. A friend, Ivan (Warren Sherrill), wanders downstairs; he was too drunk to get home the night before, lost his glasses, and is in serious trouble with his wife.

See, just a quiet little story about typical Irish men who drink too much—except for Sharkey, who is "off the drink." But in the first 15 minutes, you care about these people and what might happen to them. Then, enter the catalyst: Nicky (Brock Benson), the man that Sharkey's girlfriend took up with after he was sent to prison. So there's animosity between the two straight off. Nicky brings with him the mysterious Mr. Lockhart (Kevin Hart), who has been searching from pub to pub all day for Sharkey for nefarious reasons. It appears that Mr. Lockhart lost a poker game to him in years past, which caused certain good things to happen in the life of Sharkey; now Mr. Lockhart has come to claim the promised return match in hopes of winning his soul as payment. And the poker game ensues.

No spoiler alerts here! You have to see this one to find out what happens. But what made the production so great for me was that there wasn't a lot of "acting" going on. Each of these men simply "was" the person he was portraying; each one was so immersed and so genuine that it wasn't like watching a play—it was like watching life from a corner of the sitting room. Richard's ceaseless rambling was so obnoxious, you just wanted to slap him and tell him to shut up. Ivan was so concerned about getting home for Christmas and then so crestfallen when his wife kicked him out. Nicky went through a series of emotions, from bravado about meeting his former rival again to anger to arrogance and back to cautious friendship—all with an ease that left no doubt as to his sincerity.

Ashton and Hart have shared the stage many times before, and to watch these pros at work was a delight. Hart's Mr. Lockhart was all smiles and cordiality when everyone was in the room, but when it was just he and Sharkey, the truth and horns came out. His explanation about why he was there was met with uncomprehending disbelief, then a slowly dawning remembrance and realization. From there on out, the verbal and visual sparring between the two became the Irish equivalent of the Gunfight at the OK Corral.

It's easy to forget how good John Ashton is on stage because he doesn't perform that often. But when he does, watch out! The quiet ways he showed his sincere love of his brother, his frustration with the whole situation of his brother's blindness (he obviously remembers the better times when they were both fit and young), and his submissive acceptance of Mr. Lockhart's demands—these are all lived with sincerity on the stage.

Michael Stricker's direction seemed to just create the space within which these characters could move comfortably and tell their story simply. An example of the comfort zone he created: A glass got broken on stage accidentally the day I attended. Instead of feeling locked into the blocking provided, the two sighted characters on stage at the time simply moved to the side of the blind character and quietly took care of the broken glass so he wouldn't cut himself . . . the way they would have done in a real situation. A strangely touching spontaneous moment.

Stuart Barr's set captures the crowded clutter of a tiny Irish flat perfectly, with everything slightly worn and well used. McPherson's script and his skill at presenting an Irish sensibility are brilliant. It's a tale of karma, with kind of good things happening to basically good people; in their poverty and blindness and alcoholism and shaky relationships, life could be worse. And even a Christmas card can bring hope.

A short run at the Dairy gives you only eight chances to catch this brilliant production. Put it on your calendar right now—call the box office right now. Do not hesitate!

WOW factor: 10

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BBB
Rating: A+

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