

Echo Theatre tackles Arlene Hutton's 'Nibroc Trilogy'

10:57 AM CST on Wednesday, February 11, 2009

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Theater folks generally breathe a big sigh of relief after opening night. The tension and work of rehearsals is done. All that's left is to have fun doing the show.

That's not exactly what Echo Theatre's cast and crew felt like after Thursday's opening of the charming romantic comedy *Last Train to Nibroc*. They still had two more plays in Arlene Hutton's *Nibroc Trilogy* to get ready.

"Coming back two days later to begin 'teching' another play feels just rude," co-director Pam Myers-Morgan said at the beginning of a long workday on Saturday.

The two remaining plays, *See Rock City* and *Gulf View Drive*, open this Thursday and next and will rotate in repertory with the first. Echo will present marathon performances of all three shows the final two Saturdays of the run, Feb. 21 and 28. Hutton will be in from New York to see the first marathon and do a couple of play-writing workshops for the company on Feb. 22.

This miniature epic began as a one-act play about a young couple, Raleigh (Ian Sinclair at Echo) and May (Morgan Justiss), who meet on a train in the early 1940s. Hutton wrote the remaining two scenes of *Last Train* a year later. The first sequel occurred to her spontaneously when she was at a conference in Australia; the second came along when she needed a project for the New Harmony Project in Indiana.

So the story of May and Raleigh, spread out over a decade in the trilogy, developed in the playwright's head almost in real time, which gives the story a spontaneous, true-to-life feel.

"My background is as an actor. Writing for me is improvisation," Hutton says.

"I put two characters in a room and have no idea what will come out of them."

Theaters in Los Angeles and New York premiered the trilogy a couple of years ago. Echo's is the first production between the two coasts, although *Last Train* has had more than 100 stagings all over the world, including one at Fort Worth's Circle Theatre in 2002.

Undertaking all three plays at once is a project much larger in scale than anything Echo, which is dedicated to producing scripts by women, has attempted before.

Just establishing a calendar for rehearsals, with a preliminary reading of one play in the afternoon and a full-scale run-through of another at night, was an intricate task.

To get the job done, the trilogy has two directors, Myers-Morgan and Ellen Locy. "Ellen and I have very similar artistic outlooks. We're one brain in two bodies," Myers-Morgan says.

"They share the same unified vision," Sinclair adds, "but they have different insights that help us add little individual touches to the characters."



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NAN COULTER/Special Contributor
Ian Sinclair and Morgan Justiss (standing), along with Susan McMath Platt (seated, left) and Nancy Munger, appear in *See Rock City*, the second play in Arlene Hutton's *Nibroc Trilogy* being presented by Echo Theatre at the Bath House Cultural Center.

The bulk of responsibility falls on Sinclair and Justiss. They are offstage only for a few seconds between scenes in *Last Train*. Sinclair's costume changes have to be so quick that he starts out wearing three pairs of pants and sheds one at each scene change.

Justiss is onstage basically all of the first two plays and is in four of six scenes in the third. When someone told her that the playwright had sent a rewritten scene that added five or six pages of text, her reaction was, "No! Not any more lines!"

Echo producing partner Kateri Cale says, "It's like learning a big Shakespearean role – without the iambic pentameter."

The large scope of a trilogy enables these plays about romance and family life to expand into themes dealing with the society at large.

"The plays go from one character's surprise at indoor plumbing to a consumer society like we have now," Myers-Morgan says.

"The way these people behave and speak and encounter the world is different as the play moves from the 1940s to the '50s. The situations have stunning parallels today – the war, the lack of jobs. It makes you wonder, 'How did we get through it?' If ever the personal was political, this is it."

The people working on the trilogy are too young to have immediate experience of World War II and the 1950s, but they have found ways to relate. Myers-Morgan's parents, for instance, went to Rock City, Ga., on their honeymoon – just like May and Raleigh.

Others could identify, too. "I actually spoke to my grandmother," Justiss says. "She had a similar experience to May's when she went on a bus to see my grandfather at the age of 18. I got a lot of information from her about what it was like to make a trip like that by herself."

Some things, though, don't require a lot of research.

"Falling in love is just not that different in any era," quips Myers-Morgan.