

# Last Train to Nibroc Makes for a Subtle, Sentimental Journey

## CTD makes Cuckoo's Nest a comedy of errors

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A chance encounter blossoms into romance between Raleigh (Ian Sinclair) and May (Morgan Justiss) in Echo Theatre's Last Train to Nibroc.

Details:  
continues through  
February 28 at the  
Bath House Cultural  
Center. Call  
214-904-0500.

Subject(s):  
[Sue Loncar](#), [Ian Sinclair](#),  
[Contemporary theatre of  
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A little bit of Walton's Mountain, a sprinkling of Horton Foote, a dash of Tennessee Williams and you're on *Last Train to Nibroc*, the first play in Arlene Hutton's charming, evocative *Nibroc Trilogy*. **Echo Theatre** is presenting all three plays in rolling repertory this month at the Bath House Cultural Center. And what a treat the first one is, staged simply but elegantly and acted with depth and grace by skillfully directed professionals. It's the best and most successfully realized production by Echo in many years.

In *Last Train* we meet the couple at the center of the three-play cycle, Raleigh Brummett (played by Ian Sinclair) and May Gill (Dallas theater newcomer Morgan Justiss). They are strangers on a train sometime early in World War II. She's returning from Los Angeles, having abruptly ended her relationship with a hometown soldier-boy who's about to ship out. Raleigh, still in uniform, has been medically discharged from the army for epilepsy, a condition, we'll find out later, May doesn't quite understand.

In the crowded train car, Raleigh picks the seat next to May, who's engrossed in the soppy Lloyd C. Douglas novel *Magnificent Obsession*. She's a straight-backed Polly Prim type. (If that soldier-boy ever tried to get further than first base, she'd hit him with her Bible.) Try as she might to ignore Raleigh's attempts to get her attention, he eventually wears her down. She warms up even more when she discovers he's from a small Kentucky town just a few miles from her own. He has big plans of

becoming a writer in New York City. In the back of the train, he tells May, are the bodies of novelists F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West, who died in Los Angeles on successive days. Raleigh thinks it's providential that he's sharing the ride east with such titanic literary figures, even if they are corpses.

It's not often in a two-character, one-act play that the playwright is able to weave back-story, present action and the future hopes and dreams of characters so subtly together in the first scene. Hutton does it with a natural flow of little bits of conversation, punctuated with pauses that allow just enough time for us to take closer looks at Sinclair and Justiss. He's a young swain with slicked-back hair, broad shoulders and dark, humpy eyes. And listen to the rumble in his chesty voice. There may not be any actor working in Dallas right now with a warmer, sexier voice than Ian Sinclair.

Justiss, a gangly redhead, is more character actress than ingénue. But she does lovely work in *Last Train to Nibroc*, playing May as wide-eyed girl in the first scene and by the third scene, set a few years later, showing how she's evolved into a strong young woman secure in her own skin, though still a little naïve about the ways of grown-up love.

These are easy characters to develop affection for. And as directed by Ellen Locy and Pam Myers-Morgan, the actors have a sweet chemistry that sweeps the audience right into Raleigh and May's budding romance.

"It's funny what puts people on trains together," Raleigh says in *Last Train to Nibroc*. If the next two plays about the couple's marriage, *See Rock City* and *Gulf View Drive* (stacked in three-play marathons the last two Saturdays of the run), are as good as the first, we're happy to get aboard.

Should ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*** be a rollicking, knee-slapping comedy? Probably not, but that's only the first thing off-kilter in the production now running at **Contemporary Theatre of Dallas**.

Ken Kesey's 1962 novel, later adapted for the stage by Dale Wasserman (and turned into the Oscar-winning 1975 movie), does have a certain twisted hilarity built in. The setting is the dreary day room of a state mental hospital (nicely rendered by designer Clare Floyd DeVries). Eight male patients, some more disturbed than others, and a few of their medical caretakers interact in a series of disastrous group therapy sessions.

When larger-than-life trickster R.P. McMurphy (played by Mark Nutter) arrives as a transfer from a nearby prison work farm, having opted for incarceration in the hospital rather than suffer the pea fields, the balance of power between patients and staff starts to shift.

Director Marianne Galloway has staged this play, oddly, as a door-slamming farce, moving characters around with Three Stooges-style wackiness, including the old foot-stuck-in-a-bucket gag. The actors playing the patients are all regulars in comedies at CTD and elsewhere, so they're up for generating nonstop ha-ha-ha. Hard to blame them for doing what they do best.

Nye Cooper, the *Santaland Diaries* star, has crazy hair and shaky legs as Cheswick, a patient always on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Randy Pearlman is group leader Harding, a nudnik so scared of his sexy young wife he's had himself committed rather than deal with impotence. Ryan Martin is Scanlon, as scraggly as the Unabomber and in possession of a mysterious suitcase full of wires. And as stuttering teenager Billy Bibbit, Andrews Cope is the only one not mugging it up for laughs. He alone seems to know what play he's really in.

The broad comedy confuses and overwhelms the unsettling themes of *Cuckoo's Nest*, a dark indictment of the American mental health system and a clever study of a battle of wills among Jungian archetypes. In the three-ring circus atmosphere devised at CTD, however, two important and deadly serious characters get lost—the giant, catatonic Chief Bromden (Jim Johnson), who narrates between scenes, and the icy-evil Nurse Ratched (Sue Loncar).

Loncar tries to underplay the imperious nurse, which isn't a bad thing given the broad statements this actress, who's also the boss at CTD, usually delivers onstage. But her Nurse Ratched seems more tired than terrifying, like a slumber party-weary mom who forgot to renew her Xanax prescription. On opening night, Loncar struggled with dialogue too, which further undermined Ratched's imperturbability (she kept calling her nemesis "Mr. Murphy"). A tall woman of many interesting angles, Loncar has the physical attributes to be an imposing nurse. But instead of looking like a scary bird of prey in all that head-to-toe white, she bears a startling and inappropriately funny resemblance to Nurse Diesel in Mel Brooks' Hitchcock parody *High Anxiety*.

The likability of actor Mark Nutter works for and against his portrayal of McMurphy. He's got the smiling con artist part of him nailed, but Nutter never gets near the menace of a character serving

time for statutory rape of a 15-year-old. McMurphy's a bullshit artist supreme, but without any hint of malice, the sudden burst of violence between him and the nurse at the end of the first act is out of character. We should sense the fuse burning down as Ratched goads him and the suicidal Bibbit during the therapy group. That doesn't happen in the CTD production of *Cuckoo's Nest*, which gets gummed up in too much kooky comedy.

The Nibroc Trilogy

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest