

STAGE REVIEW: 'Barrymore' at Actors' NET

By Anthony Stoeckert

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George Hartpence in Barrymore.

When audiences at the Heritage Center Theatre first meet John Barrymore, he is bouncing onto the stage with glee. He seems carefree, humming a tune, reciting dirty limericks, and showing us his “medicinal bag,” which is filled with prescriptions from his “pharmacist” at the Jungle Club on Seventh Avenue. He seems like a lot of fun, as long as you’ve never been married to him.

In William Luce’s play, *Barrymore*, we watch the great, but fading, actor rehearse for a comeback performance of *Richard III*. More accurately, we watch him try to rehearse, because John Barrymore doesn’t get much work done, he’d rather drink and talk. Anything to avoid work.

Over the course of this 90-minute show he will share his life’s story with sarcasm, self-deprecating humor, and a touch of regret. He talks of his sexual escapes and outlandish behavior, such as urinating in a potted palm tree next to a table of women from the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The play is a bawdy hoot, and George Hartpence has a lot of fun playing this legend in Actors’ NET of Bucks County’s staging of *Barrymore* through March 19. The play is running on alternating nights with another one-man show, *Underneath the Lintel* (see review on Page 3).

Technically, *Barrymore* isn't a one-man show, there is one other character, a prompter named Frank, played by Nicholas Pecht who is mostly unseen during the play. Still, the two actors have terrific chemistry. Barrymore needs prompting — lots of prompting — when working on lines. A very funny scene involves his attempt to rehearse the famous opening of *Richard III*. (“Now is the winter of our discontent...”) When Frank starts by saying “Now,” Barrymore replies, “Yes, now's as a good a time as any.” Barrymore can't recite one word of the famous soliloquy, and he just keeps repeating what Frank says, one word at a time.

It's very funny, but Mr. Hartpence also hints at some frustration. It's a few months after Pearl Harbor, and Barrymore is acting because he needs to. He jokingly calls Richard III, “Richard the Turd,” but through the jokes, the truth slips out, “I need to be taken seriously, once more.”

He even needs prompting when naming his four wives. All of his marriages ended in divorce. He and one wife were happy for 20 years, then they met (ba-dum-bum). His best marriage was No. 3, with Dolores — “She made such a success of it, I had to get out.”

Not much rehearsal gets done. Whenever Frank tries to get to work, John thinks of some story or anecdote to share. Perhaps he's avoiding getting down to business because he knows he can't do it anymore, he can't remember the lines, and he's afraid to expose himself.

Oh, but he could do it at one time. He grew up in a family that seems to have been acting since the first stage was built. Both of his parents were actors, and his maternal grandmother ran a theater. The family legacy continues even today, with Drew Barrymore, John's granddaughter.

John's relationship with his parents was troubled. He barely knew his mother, and she died when he was 11. John lost his virginity to his stepmother, she tricks him into thinking they were working on his diction. In Barrymore's telling, his father walked in on them and wasn't bothered at all.

It's a tricky scene, but Mr. Hartpence handles it wonderfully. It's very funny, but at the same time, we know John is troubled by his childhood.

John's two siblings were sister Ethel — an acclaimed stage actress who also had success in film and television, she won an Oscar, but didn't much care — and brother Lionel, best-known today for his role as the villain in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

At 14, John started appearing in plays with his father, and eventually broke out on his own. But his creative peak came when he was encouraged to play the classics — his Hamlet even won praise in England, rare for an American. He also had some successes in movies, but eventually returned to the stage.

Lionel stuck with movies, that's where the money is, and when he became confined to a wheelchair, he said it was the best thing that could happen to an actor, think of the parts he'll get. Mr. Hartpence gets big laughs with his wonderful impression of Lionel.

Barrymore has its touching moments, but for the most part, the evening is lighthearted. Mr. Hartpence is funny and charming, and commands the stage as this actor shares the story of his life and career. He and director Cheryl Doyle have created a love letter to theater and acting with this show. Mr. Hartpence is clearly at home on the Heritage Center stage, dressed in a natty pinstriped suit and fedora. Later, he's in a getup as Richard III, complete with Prince Valiant wig — it's a funny sight, but he eventually gives up, he just doesn't have it anymore.

That performance of *Richard III* never happened, John wasn't up for it, and alcoholism pretty much ended his career. But you get the sense he wouldn't change a thing, he had too much fun. “I've had a hell of a life for a man who's been dead for 15 years.”

Barrymore is being performed at the Heritage Center Theatre, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania. Performance dates are March 5, 11, 13, 17 and 19. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors; actorsnetbucks.org; 215-295-3694.