



Actors' NET performs Tennessee Williams' 'Night of the Iguana'

Weather



By Ted Otten/Special to The Times
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Although winter may be leaving troublesome evidence of its presence outside the Morrisville Heritage Center, the climate is tropical and steamy onstage as the Actors' NET of Bucks County's production of Tennessee Williams' drama "The Night of the Iguana," directed by Cheryl Doyle, heads into its final weekend.

Williams based his play, which opened on Broadway in 1961 for a run of 316 performances and was nominated for a Tony Award as best play, on his own 1948 short story about an Episcopal priest experiencing a crisis of faith in the troubled world just prior to America's entry into World War II.

At Actors' NET, George Hartpence, who also designed the realistic set that represents a seedy hotel called Costa Verde on the west coast of Mexico, plays the hard drinking and burned out Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon, and he believes that the T. in his name might stand for trouble.

Hartpence's wife, Carol Thompson, who plays the role of Hannah Jelkes, suggests that that T. might stand for Tennessee, since Williams put much of his own religious and philosophical questioning into the words and actions of this tortured and troubled character.

Williams scholars, however, believe Shannon is based on Williams' cousin and friend, Sidney Lanier, who was, at one time, rector of St. Clement's Episcopal Church in New York.

"The title is also a clue to understanding what I think is the point of the play: that basic human need to reach out to others," Hartpence says.

"There's an iguana captured by the hotel's Mexican workers that's tied to a pole, and, just as that animal is at the end of his rope, so are many of the characters."

Hartpence points out that the rest of the world is in turmoil, although the German family that is part of the tourist group from Texas Shannon is leading sing their marching songs merrily. Shannon, who had been locked out of his church in Virginia and then suffered a nervous breakdown, is being reviled and shunned by his group because he has been accused of the statutory rape of a 16-year old girl (played by Maryalice Rubens-Topoleski), who's among the oddly assorted tourist group Hartpence classifies as "so, so awful."

"Shannon's also fending off the advances of the recently widowed Maxine Faulk (Susan Fowler), who owns the hotel and with whom, I suspect, he has had some previous encounters," Hartpence says. "He describes her as bigger than life and twice as unnatural. They both fire off a good many barbed and witty lines in their conversations."

Hartpence believes Shannon does reach out for contact, but to Hannah, not to Maxine.

The penniless Hannah and her ancient grandfather, known as Nonno (Mort Paterson), are also staying, at Shannon's recommendation, at Maxine's hotel. Together, the duo has traveled the world, which is becoming increasing more restricted and more violent as war spreads beyond Europe, marketing their skills.

Hannah is a sketch artist, and Nonno is "the world's oldest living and practicing poet," who gives recitations and is working on what he believes to be his last and greatest poem.

"In the 25 years they have traveled together, they had been very successful, but things have changed. The world is different, and Nonno's health is deteriorating," Thompson says. "She must face what she will do when he dies, and she is alone. She says she'll

probably just go on doing what she's done, but that prospect could be frightening.

"She describes herself as a spinster in a conversation with Maxine, but I don't think she means that in the stereotypical definition as someone who shuts herself off from human contact," Thompson says. "She has experienced what you could call the desperations of life, but she has endured and seen her way through those, perhaps by her honesty and her ability to appreciate what beauty she has been able to find in almost any situation.

"She does seek that human contact because she cares about people and is open to others, and she reaches out to Shannon, especially in the second half, when he is tied up in a hammock for his own safety because he has lost control," Thompson says.

Thompson is looking forward to the upcoming productions of both Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and Ken Ludwig's "Moon Over Buffalo" at Actors' NET in the spring.

The conversations between Shannon and Hannah during that long night are cited by both Hartpence and Thompson as their favorite moments in the play, as is Nonno's recitation of his finally completed poem.

"Hannah and Shannon work to connect by having an extended conversation that is so real, so intimate about themselves, and, we hope, interesting to the audience," Hartpence says.

"It's not often that actors get to say such beautiful dialogue while sitting down comfortably on a moonlit veranda," he adds.

"Night of the Iguana"

Actors' NET of Bucks County

When: 8 p.m. today and tomorrow, 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Morrisville Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave. (Route 32), Morrisville, Pa.

Admission: \$20, senior citizens \$17, children younger than 12 \$10, WHYIY cardholders \$15, group discounts available; (215) 295-3694 or actorsnet@aol.com



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