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Arts & Entertainment

Stage Review: Prime Stage revisits the 'monkey trial' with 'Inherit the Wind'

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By Christopher Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Jack Fordyce

Jerry Summers, left, is Matthew Harrison Brady, Jonny Summers is Howard and David Crawford is Henry Drummond, with Jay Keenan, back, as the Judge in Prime Stage Theatre's "Inherit the Wind."

Aphoristic Bible quotes, like Sibylline prophecies, can cut both ways. Take the one that provides the title for Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's famous play: "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind."

Well, who doesn't trouble their own house? But it takes only a cursory look at the published transcript of that 1925 trial of the century, the Scopes "monkey trial," which the play dramatizes, to reveal just how windy that courtroom became. Three-times Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan was one of the windiest, but his adversary, lawyer Clarence Darrow, was a wholesale word spinner, too.

That endless transcript has an addictive attraction, but it also teaches you to admire the work done by Lawrence and Lee in carving "Inherit the Wind" out of such abundance. The result is

very audience-friendly, in spite of the theoretical issues (evolution vs. creationism) at stake.

That's because the authors wisely build their drama on personalities: Bert Cates (their Scopes), the small town Galileo, refusing to let dogma deny truth; Rachel, torn between obedience to her minister father and love for the earnest defendant; Matthew Harrison Brady (their Bryan), pompous and in love with fame but trailing remnants of something noble; and Henry Drummond (their Darrow), forbidden to attack the law and so forced to go after Brady, whom he once supported.

The only central character without ambivalence is E.K. Hornbeck, the Yankee newspaper columnist based on the iconoclastic H.L. Mencken, in full pursuit of Boobus Americanus. His parallel on the other side is the minister, equally partisan in his defense of what he calls God's law.

'Inherit the Wind'

- **Where:** Prime Stage Theatre at the New Hazlett Theater, North Side.
 - **When:** Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m.; Sun. 2:30 p.m.
 - **Tickets:** \$10-\$20.
 - **More information:** 412-394-3353.
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In its 11th season of producing theater for families, this year Prime Stage Theatre has a three-play schedule that raises its age level a notch: after "Inherit the Wind," it will do Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" and S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders." The latter two will do well to prove as current as "Inherit the Wind."

The best of director Shirley Tannenbaum's production is its thorough sense of community. She uses the New Hazlett in thrust mode, wrapping the audience around the action and requiring the show's 26 actors to fill the stage with life, even spilling into the seats to watch the trial.

With such a big cast, most of the acting varies from community theater to semi-pro. But there are some small gems, including Robert Roberts' jailer, Jonny Summers' Howard and Jay Keenan's judge. Margie Johnson is touching as the embattled Rachel.

The three leads are all capable. J.P. Patrick has the sarcastic tang necessary for Hornbeck, though he never suggests motive behind his caustic commentary and self-conceit. Jerry Summers is a stolid, imposing presence as Brady, though he lacks the florid overdrive that eventually fuels the breakdown that makes Brady a figure of melancholy fun -- a key moment muffled here.

David Crawford brings his deep, mellifluous voice and a shambling modesty to Drummond. I would have thought Brady his better role, but he captures Drummond's intellectual diffidence, in which people aren't as important as the principles they embody -- something like Brady, in fact.

Whoever imagined that the battle between fundamentalist religion and inquisitive science would continue 80 years after that trial in Dayton, Tenn.? What a fine occasion for exploring troubling ideas -- it's full of teachable moments, not to mention essential history.

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