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'Sense & Sensibility' at Town Hall Theatre

By *Sophie Braccini*



From left: Nathan Emlay, Alan Coyne, Alisha Ehrlich and Heather Buck in "Sense & Sensibility." Photos Stu Selland

Even before the actors were done with rehearsals, Town Hall Theatre's "Sense & Sensibility" had already sold over a thousand tickets, and opening night was sold out. Was it all because of the Lamorinda Jane-ites (fans of Jane Austen)? Or was it the growing reputation of THT or the rave reviews Kate Hamill's new adaptation has garnered in the country?

After viewing a run through of the play, even without costumes, this reporter can testify that those early ticket holders will not be disappointed: THT's "Sense & Sensibility" will take audience members to the Regency era in a whirling dance full of life, humor, energy and passion.

This is the first time that Susan Evans, the artistic director of THT, will direct a play at the Lafayette venue. She has chosen for her debut a real crowd pleaser, in the best sense of the term. To those who think that Jane Austen is too stiff and reserved, the 2014 adaptation by Hamill will show them that there is humor, lightheartedness and social content in her work, while those who are Austen admirers will recognize her spirit

and profound understanding of the human heart.

For Evans it was a real tour de force to direct and drive the correct boisterous rhythm for a play that is comprised of 45 different scenes, in several different geographic locations, with 15 characters, three horses, two dogs, two carriages - all executed by 10 actors, eight chairs and two tables. The tempo is fast, but not furious. The actors deliver with a high energy and charming fantasy, slipping under a table to become a chair, jumping on top of a "carriage" to lead it to London, becoming a horse, before returning as one of the leading characters with amazing ease. In fact, they seem to be having a lot of fun, carried away by the turmoil of the story.

The overall storyline has not changed from Austen's original plot. It is about the coming of age of two sisters - their hopes, dreams, heartaches, lessons learned and happiness in the end. The family members, the beaux, the friends, all have their quirks and portray an era where marriage was the only possible future for a woman, while elegant idleness the only honorable career for a well-bred young man.

Evans asked the actresses playing the two sisters, Alisha Ehrlich and Heather Buck, to alternate their characters every week. She says that when she reviewed her casting notes it struck her that the two actresses were equally excellent for both roles. She offered the possibility to them and they accepted. She believes that the result is a greater understanding and empathy with the character of the opposite sister. When this reporter saw the performance, Ehrlich was Elinor Dashwood ("sense") and Buck was Marianne Dashwood ("sensibility"). They were perfect in their roles. It would be interesting to see the play a second time with casting reversed.

The rest of the cast is equally well chosen and effective, as well as versatile in the different personae they embody.

Opening night for "Sense & Sensibility" is June 2. For that night, THT will host a gala with a Regency Ball theme; then on June 13 LIT UP at Town Hall, is a literary salon where patrons can participate; and on June 8 and 22 THT presents Theatre Club, a post-show talk-back with complimentary wine. The final show is June 23. For more information and tickets, visit www.townhalltheatre.com.



From left: Heather Buck and Alisha Ehrlich in "Sense & Sensibility."

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