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'Great Expectations' realized at Town Hall Theatre for the holidays

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Kenneth Greenwell and Salim Razawi in "Great Expectations." Photo Stu Selland

The idea of a Charles Dickens' play for the holiday season brings back memories of adaptations of "A Christmas Carol," of Ebenezer Scrooge, of ghosts, of bad people turned good through the miracle of the heart, and of very touching stories that end well. This winter, Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre has decided to tackle another deeply moral Dickens' story with "Great Expectations." In the words of artistic director Susan Evans, the positive moral values and happy ending of the play capture the spirit of the holiday season, without "beating you over the head with it." The fast and often humorous play is for all audiences.

Set in Victorian England the original novel and its adaptation by Grace Childs Daly tells of the coming of age and redemption of Pip, a young commoner who wants to become a gentleman, and who will discover that what makes the real value of a human being is more in his self-worth than in his social standing. It is also a story of love and revenge that goes from surprise to surprise until the end.

adaptation of the Dickens' book requires the competent hand of a director to express the complexity of the characters through dives into the past, returns to the present moment, as well as rapid scenery and character changes for the actors. This reporter experienced one of the final rehearsals of the play.

Over the past 10 years, Town Hall Theatre has grown to successfully tackle complex playwrights. Childs Daly's

To see actors working on the construction of a show has a charm of its own. Even a few days before opening, it was still controlled chaos, fine-tuning of entrances, exits, changes of costumes; and in the middle of the rapid twirling, the characters emerged through nuggets of dialogue and acting, already fully formed, giving the incongruous spectator the desire to see more.

Director Dennis Markam explained that he chose eight young actors, many new to the Lafayette stage, to energize the dozens of characters of the play. Almost in "A Christmas Carol" style, Pip is confronted to elements of his past that come out of trunks or armoires, to help him reflect on his prior actions, informing the present moment and the decisions he has to make.

Evans says that when she read Childs Daly's adaptation of "Great Expectations" she was captured by the high energy of what was already her favorite Dickens novel, and saw its great potential for her stage. She decided to give the direction to Markam, who has shown the quality of his craft at THT directing plays such as "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" on the main stage or "Treasure Island" with the middle school cast, also a very fast-paced and complex production.

Markam says that his actors had no difficulty embodying Dickens' rich and complex characters, and enjoy the rapid succession of scenes where characters pop out of trunks like memories that had long been forgotten and suddenly re-emerge. The actors, except for Salim Razawi who plays Pip, embody up to 12 different characters each, a tour de force that had to be synchronized to the millisecond. During the rehearsals, actors learned their choreography just as precisely as their text, entrances and exits having numbers, and props moving fast to precise locations on the stage like a controlled ballet of things.

Razawi, a teaching artist for the Berkeley Rep School of Theatre Outreach program, brings a surprising range and maturity to the young man who starts his life as a poor blacksmith apprentice, becoming an educated gentleman, always believing that his great expectations will materialize. Very young actors from the THT education program participate to the production to personify children in memories of the heroes.

"Great Expectations" opens Nov. 29 and will play through Dec. 16 at Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette. More information and tickets are available at www.townhalltheatre.com.

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