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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

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[Martin Denton](#) · May 10, 2009

I don't know if you've been to the Richmond Shepard Theatre; it's very nice, but the stage is fairly compact. Yet director Kristin Skye Hoffmann, abetted by an able and energetic cast and top-notch designers, has turned it most convincingly into the archetypal mental institution that is the setting for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; and she's staged all manner of astonishing activity—including brawls, protests, and a raucous second act party—apparently undaunted by the physical limitations of the space. Hoffmann, it would seem, is a bit of a miracle worker—which may explain her attraction to this epic if unwieldy play. With her company Wide Eyed Productions she has given us a masterful revival of this landmark drama.

Adapted by Dale Wasserman from the novel by Ken Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest* is quintessential '60s protest theatre. (Why is there as yet no quintessential 21st century protest theatre?) It pits Randle Patrick McMurphy—a convict who has manipulated the System, or thinks he has, by feigning psychosis so that he can spend the final months of his sentence at a mental institution rather than a work farm—against Nurse Ratched, the stony, no-nonsense head nurse of the ward, who believes that rules must be followed without exception. The movie is so famous that I don't think it ruins much to tell you that Wasserman ensures that the deck is stacked so badly against McMurphy that the outcome is never for a minute uncertain. The ideal underlying and propelling the play is: Authority Must Always Be Questioned.

Hoffmann hones right in on the theme. Her production is clean and clear and, as the stakes ratchet up in the

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second act, unexpectedly involving and moving. Ben Newman plays McMurphy as an untutored, wild-eyed rabble-rouser; he's a reluctant revolutionary, however, which makes his journey in the play something profound. The key supporting players are excitingly embodied by a fine ensemble: Solomon Shiv as Chief Bromden, the presumed "deaf and dumb" Indian, has dignity and warmth; Trevor Dallier as Billy Bibbit, the sexually repressed stutterer whom McMurphy (sort of) takes under his wing, is convincingly youthful and vulnerable; Andrew Harriss gets to the real contradictions and complexity of Dale Harding, the patient who is de facto spokesman for the ward; and Sage Seals, Lloyd Mulvey, Billy Dutton, Leal Vona, and Robert White embody each of the other patients' specific disturbances/conditions with precise detail while also creating believable and interesting men whom we come to care about.

Anthony Reimer as Dr. Spivey, the overworked and too-often absent voice of reason, is good-humored and likable. Lucy McRae, Duane Chivon Ferguson, Brian Kaufman, and Joe Hernandez portray other members of the staff as accessible human beings we can relate to. Amy Lee Pearsall, in the play's toughest role of Nurse Ratched, makes it clear that her character really believes in the prescriptions (and proscriptions) that she lives by; making the head nurse vulnerable and even sympathetic is an interesting choice given Wasserman and Kesey's clear prejudice against this character, who stands for everything we're meant to oppose in the story.

Completing the cast, in memorable cameos, are Ali Gilbertson and Brianne Mai as McMurphy's visitors.

The set, designed by Joshua David Bishop, is scrupulously detailed without becoming overwhelming; for example, there are doors leading to a closet and the men's room, but these areas themselves are only suggested, left for us to fill in the details. Costumes by Eleni Koutsouradis (assisted by Sabrina Khan), lighting by Ryan Metzler, and sound by Rusty Wardall, Trevor Dallier, and Sage Seals contribute invaluable to the world of the play.

This is exemplary indie theater. Whether you will come to *Cuckoo's Nest* for the first time or are ripe for a re-examination of it, I wholeheartedly recommend this revival from Wide Eyed Productions.

Opened: May 6, 2009

Closed: May 24, 2009

Artists Involved

Cast: Ben Newman, Trevor Dallier, Solomon Shiv, Amy Lee Pearsall, Andrew Harriss, Sage Seals, Lloyd Mulvey, Billy Dutton, Anthony Reimer, Lucy McRae, Ali Gilbertson, Brianne Mai, Duane Ferguson, Joe Hernandez, Brian Kaufman, Robert White, Leal Vona

Author: Dale Wasserman

Director: Kristin Skye Hoffmann

Costumes: Eleni Koutsouradis

Lighting: Ryan Metzler

Sets: Joshua David Bishop

Sound: Rusty Wardall, Trevor Dallier, Sage Seals

Stage Manager: Megan Jupin

Producer: Wide Eyed Productions

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