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# SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

## *Tinyard Hill, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy Tale and The Unexpected Man*

### **TheatreWorks presents World Premiere Musical *Tinyard Hill***

TheatreWorks opens its 40th season with the world premiere of Tommy Newman and Mark Allen's musical, *Tinyard Hill*, at the Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto through August 16th. This is the centerpiece of the 8th Annual New Works Festival.

*Tinyard Hill* is set in the small town of Tinyard Hill, Georgia, in 1964. The Vietnam War is looming on the horizon but it seems far away from the small country town. David Kingsley (Chris Critelli) and his father Russell (James Moyer) run a blacksmith shop that has seen better days, now surviving on novelty tourist souvenirs. David wants to bring the two-hundred-year-old business into the 20th century, but he is about to receive a "greetings from the United States government" letter and that does not make his father happy. Russell served in the army during World War II and does not want his son to go through the same horrible experiences he suffered during that conflict. Entering into this country musical is New Yorker Aileen (Melissa WolfKlain) who is engaged to a man ten years her senior in New York. She is visiting her Aunt May (Allison Briner) whose romance with Russell was abandoned due to World War II. A romance takes place between David and Allison but the war raises its ugly head, causing conflicts with the romance and family business.



**Chris Critelli and Melissa WolfKlain**

Tommy Newman and Mark Allen contribute both lyrics and music to nineteen songs in this countrified musical. I would call the music "atmospheric," since the score is mostly country pop melodies that are generally forgettable. The melodies often meander and the only hummable songs are "Keep it Simple," sung by Allison Briner, and "I Shook His Hand," presented by James Moyer. This musical still seems to be a work in progress since the first act is much too long. The second act is more comprehensive and contains most of the dramatic elements of the piece.

Director Robert Kelley has given this musical a very impressive production. The set design

by Tom Langguth is extraordinary, with a smithy and cottage among abundant Spanish moss. Pamela Gray has provided some wonderful lighting that helps establish the mood.

As David, Chris Critelli (Off-Broadway *The New Hopeville Comics*, *Kidnapping Laura Linney*) has good vocal chops, more like someone from the "American Idol" TV show. This husky actor has a Li'l Abner quality about him in looks and acting. However, the most impressive moments belong to James Moye (Broadway *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Full Monty*, *Urinetown*) portraying Russell. The dramatic monologue describing Russell's time in World War II, the sacrifices he made, and how he swears his son will not have to go through the same experiences in Vietnam is powerful. He has a dominant voice singing "I Shook His Hand," "That Woman" and "A Change Is Overdue."

Allison Briner (*Mamma Mia!* *Titanic* tour, *Forbidden Broadway*) is believable as Aunt May, whose conduct hides more complicated things. She has an engaging delivery that complements her wisecracking. She also has a fine voice singing "Keep It Simple," "That Woman" and "What Kinda Mother?" Melissa Wolfklain (2007 SFBATCC Award for *Singin' in the Rain*, and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* at Broadway by the Bay) lacks the vocal power of the other three, but her acting skills lend great profundity to the character of Aileen.

The small orchestra under the direction of William Liberatore brings out the twangy contemporary mode of what the composers have written. This musical will appeal to regional houses in the Midwest and South who are looking for new chamber-scaled tuners.

*Tinyard Hill* plays through August 16 at the Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Rd, Palo Alto. For tickets please call 650-463-1960 or visit [www.theatreworks.org](http://www.theatreworks.org). Their next production will be David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* starring Francis Jue. It opens at the Mountain View Performance Arts Center on August 26 and runs through September 20th.

*Photo: Tracy Martin*

### **An Engrossing Production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***

SF Playhouse is presenting an engrossing production of Dale Wasserman's adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, through September 5th. I have seen this very stormy melodrama many times since the winter of 1963 at the Cort Theatre with Kirk Douglas as the free-spirited Randle P. McMurphy, a young Gene Wilder as Billy Bibbit and Ed Ames as Chief Bromden. Later, I saw Gary Sinise repeat the role of McMurphy.



**Hansford Prince, David Sinaiko and  
Susie Damilano**

Director Bill English and a company of fine actors present this epic struggle of a riotous free spirit and the all-authoritative specter of community conformity in a state mental hospital in Oregon. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was the forerunner of the countercultural bang in the late 1960s, and yet it is still relevant in today's society. Although the action takes place in a state mental hospital it is a microcosm of the

real world.

Randle P. McMurphy (Hansford Prince), an uncontrollable rebel, is committed to a hospital where shock treatments and frontal lobotomies are the norm. He meets the meek inmates of the institution under the care, custody and control of cruel bitch Nurse Ratched (Suzi Damilano). She reminds me of my sixth grade Catholic sister at St. Mary's School.

We meet an assortment of interesting psychotic and neurotic characters, including a very young, stuttering virgin named Billy Bibbit (Patrick Alparone), a deceptively haughty intellectual named Harding (Louis Parnell), the emotionally devastated but highly sharp-eyed Cheswick (Yusef Lambert) and a silent and inobtrusive figure, Chief Bromden (Michael Torres), who has a quiet fascination. Also walking around the recreation room is a man who has had too many shock treatments, played strikingly by Joe Madero.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* hosts a brilliant cast under the superb direction of Bill English. Hansford Prince (*Two Trains Running*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Our Lady of 121st Street*) puts a different spin on the huckster Randal P. Murphy. He plays the role with bravura rigor, hilarity and guts. He is the antihero for all ages. Patrick Alparone (*Octopus*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*) gives a rich and poignant performance as the stammering, cowering Billy Bibbit.

Suzi Damilano (2008 SFBATCC award for *Bug*) plays the arch-nemesis Nurse Ratched who observes Murphy ("He is not, in fact, extraordinary; he's simply a man, nothing more"). She plays the role like a controlling mother figure who is a castrating harpy and speaks in a monotone voice throughout the production. Michael Torres (founding member of Camp Santo) gives his stoic Chief Bromden a psychological complexity. Louis Parnell (SFBATCC Award winner for *Cabaret* last year) is excellent as the literate Harding who expertly delivers a speech defining the "guilt, shame and fear" that keeps these voluntarily incarcerated patients from venturing into the outside world.

Brian Raffi is excellent as the doomsday-propheying Scanlon, and Gilberto Esqueda, who looks like Danny DeVito in the film version, is very good as the hallucinating Martini. Yusef Lambert gives an emotional performance as the highly observant Cheswick. Joe Madero gives a first class performance as the lobotomized Ruckley, and David Sinaiko presents a good portrayal of the institution's self-effacing psychiatrist Dr. Spivey. Dwight Huntsman and Catz Forsman are effective in the small roles of the hospital aides.

There is very little slack allowed the fairer sex in this visceral play. Madeline H.D. Brown is sexy as Billy's gift, Candy Starr, while Marissa Keltie has little to do as Nurse Flinn and hooker Sandy.

Bill English's set is an impressively detailed, clinical 1960s mental institution recreation room with swinging doors, a glass-enclosed observation booth and white and green institutional paint. Lighting effects by Michael Oesch are terrific, with bright institutional lights for the recreation room and startling light, with sound effects by Steve Schoenbeck, for the shock treatments.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* runs through September 5th at the SF Playhouse, 533 Sutter Street, San Francisco. For tickets call 415-677-9596 or visit [www.sfplayhouse.org](http://www.sfplayhouse.org). Their next production is *First Day of School* by Billy Aronson opening on September 26th.

*Photo: Zabrina Tipton*

### ***Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy Tale* an Effective Cutting Edge Musical**

The Boxcar Theatre is presenting a world premiere, hot urban-rock musical called *Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy Tale* through August 22nd at their small theatre on Natoma Street. Under the artistic direction of Nick A. Olivero and Peter Matthews, Boxcar is known to present interesting cutting-edge dramas for hip young audiences.

*Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy Tale* is a strong, raw study of the life of street people and hustlers. It might not be everyone's cup of tea, but I found it to be an exciting night of theatre. The music of Michael Mohammed and Nick A. Olivero's lyrics are a dynamic mix of rock and edgy sounds that capture the raw emotion and sometimes extreme anxiety of the characters. The book by Nick A. Olivero is a potent drama of desperate street people and male hustlers.

*Rent Boy Ave.* is the story of young, naive David (Bobby Bryce), just off the bus and hitting the streets of San Francisco. He meets Mark (Bradly Mena), a seventeen-year veteran of male prostitution who claims he is not gay. He is there for the money. The two struggle to survive a nasty world of insatiable hunger and the bible-thumping Sister Mercy (Michelle Ianiro). We meet such fascinating characters as Jackie (Danelle Medeiros), a prostitute fighting drug addiction who is controlled by her vicious pimp (Anthony Rollins-Mullens). There is the dirty old man (Donald Currie) who loves tender young boys; a bag lady, Trashcan Sally (Erica Richardson), who wanders around the small stage; another hustler named Twink (Jepoy Ramos); plus a strange, very grimy old man called Daddy (Marc Savitt), who says nothing. This is not a sweet little upbeat musical, although there could be a happy ending for one of the hustlers. The message of a modern day Hansel and Gretel is truly touching. The cast, musicians and staging are vibrant.

Bobby Bryce gives a touching performance as the naive boy. He sings with soulful zest in "Once Upon a Time" and "Nightmare." Bradly Mena gives an absorbing portrayal as the rough but mixed up hustler Mark. Outstanding is Donald Currie as the dirty old man. Dressed in a business suit, he gives an agonizing portrayal of a man filled with guilt for his sexual peccadilloes.

Danelle Medeiros is enticing as the sexy prostitute. He has terrific vocals, especially on "Punk Rock Slut." Michelle Ianiro who portrays Sister Mercy has a powerful, heartfelt voice singing "Down the Path." Anthony Rollin-Mullens' speech is in a strange rhythm that works very well within his role as The Pimp. Erica Richardson, Marc Savitt and Jepoy Ramos are very successful as street people.

Director Wolfgang Wachalovsky excellently directs this strong drama in which the audience almost becomes part of the action. The walls of the 46-seat theatre have been painted with graffiti. Sometimes the street people interact with the audience. If you like exciting and guerilla-type drama, this is the production for you. With a little bit of trimming this could play at an Off-Broadway theatre.

*Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy's Tale* plays through August 22nd at the Boxcar's theatre located at 505 Natoma Street at 6th Street, San Francisco. For tickets call 415-776-1747 or visit

[boxcartheatre.org](http://boxcartheatre.org). Their next production is *Romeo & Julien* based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and adapted by Nick A. Olivero. It opens on September 14th.

### ***The Unexpected Man***

For 80 minutes I was held spellbound by the performances of Ken Ruta and Abigail Van Alyn in Yasmina Reza's ironic comedy *The Unexpected Man* in the Spare Stage production at the Exit Theatre. This is a brisk, brief, chic and cutting-edge drama about two persons on a train heading to Frankfurt from Paris.

The pair find themselves in a compartment, and the woman recognizes the man since his very face is on the back of a book she is carrying in her bag. The man is oblivious of her, since she has problems of her own. Each has wonderful monologues that are heard by the audience alone. We are spellbound when we hear about the famous author and his laconic worries about his digestion and his daughter's repugnant fiancé. The play is a compelling study of the relationship between writers and their readers, and between strangers on a train. *The Unexpected Man* is an acquired taste since the play is basically two monologues and no dialogue.

I saw *The Unexpected Man* in London with the great Michael Gabon and Eileen Atkins and often wondered why a company did not produce it locally. It certainly needs two fine actors to keep the audience interested in the characters. Director Stephen Drewes found two superior actors to play the roles. Ken Ruta and Abigail Van Alyn give mesmerizing performances on an almost bare stage in the intimate theatre. There are two wooden benches and most of the action takes place just sitting and talking. It takes the caliber of these two excellent actors to make this a wonderful night of theatre.

*The Unexpected Man* has been extended through August 15th at the Exit Theatre, 156 Eddy Street, San Francisco. For more information on upcoming productions by Spare Stage go to [www.sparestage.com](http://www.sparestage.com).

Cheers - and be sure to Check the [lineup of great shows this season in the San Francisco area](#)

- [Richard Connema](#)

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