



Pat Jordan, left, plays a teacher, and Eleanor Morrison plays her gifted student in "Collected Stories" at Port City Playhouse

Theater Patrons Have Much to Choose From This Winter

By Michael Toscano - Special to The Washington Post - Thursday, January 13, 2005; Page VA06

Northern Virginia's winter theater season has revved up after the holiday hiatus with an ambitious schedule competing for attention with glittering presidential inaugural events. There are multiple opening nights this week in Alexandria and Arlington, including two world premieres and one area debut. Along with the new this week comes a look at the year just ended, as nominations for the best community-based work onstage in 2004 will be announced.

Already in preview performances and with the official opening Sunday, Signature Theatre has a new work by its resident muse, Norman Allen. "Fallen From Proust" is a contemporary comedy from the playwright whose previous works include "Nijinsky's Last Dance," "In the Garden" and "Melville Slept Here." "It's a light, romantic comedy of manners, and there are some twists and turns that have serious aspects to it," Allen said. "But for the most part, it's a fun look at contemporary mores and morality."

Set in San Francisco, "Fallen From Proust" explores the intersections of love and friendship among a trio of thirty-something friends. An old volume of Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" provides a focal point for changes and revelations. Allen promises the play is topical. "There's some fun with politics," he said. "One of the main characters is a gay Republican, so we have some fun with that, a red-state guy in a blue-state state." "Fallen From Proust" runs through Feb. 20.

The dazzling performance style melding visual spectacle with innovative dance and intense drama created by Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili will be on display beginning tomorrow night as Synetic Theatre debuts its original production, "Bohemians." Directed by Paata and choreographed by Irina, "Bohemians" will be the first full-fledged Synetic production to play in Classika Theatre's cramped Shirlington playhouse under their new cooperative arrangement. The Tsikurishviliis say "Bohemians" will provide "a stunning, and even brutal, view into the hearts of children" as the machinations of adults are presaged in the games they play as kids. "Bohemians" runs through March 6.

Little Theatre of Alexandria will lighten the mood considerably this Saturday as it presents the Washington premiere of "Das Barbecü." "It's grand opera meets the Grand Ole Opry," director Frank D. Shutts said. "Its history is from the Seattle Opera Company. They wanted to introduce general audiences to the characters in Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen" so they commissioned this piece. They weren't necessarily enthusiastic about the result, but the theater world was because it was a hysterical musical comedy that teaches about that opera entirely with country-western music and dialogue from modern-day Texas."

Five performers play 30 characters, backed by a five-piece "country" band in what Shutts describes as "really a parody of Texas, more than opera." He hopes some of the Lone Star State residents swarming area hotels this month for the presidential inauguration will stop in to see two feuding families chasing after a magical ring, a double shotgun wedding, a singing cowboy with two fiancées, and "a tribute to guacamole." "Das Barbecü" runs through Feb. 5.

Not to be outdone, Dominion Stage opens its own parody, "Ruthless! The Musical," next Friday as it borrows Arlington's intimate Theater on the Run. The show, rarely seen in this area, spoofs the classic films and plays "The Bad Seed," "All About Eve," "Gypsy," "The Women," and "Valley of the Dolls." A pre-teen Britney Spears had the lead role when the show ran off-Broadway in 1992, portraying 8-year-old Tina, a nightmare of a child who will do anything to star in the school play. Almost two dozen songs punctuate this comedy about the depths to which people sink to get what they want. "Ruthless! The Musical" runs through Feb. 5.

The American Century Theater and Port City Playhouse both have quiet, serious dramas on the boards this month. TACT has "Tea and Sympathy," Robert Anderson's moving 1953 study of a sensitive teenage boy and the mature woman who rescues him from despair. It runs through Feb. 5 at Theater II of the Gunston Arts Center in Arlington. **Port City opens Donald Margulies's Pulitzer Prize-nominated play, "Collected Stories," next Friday at Alexandria's Lee Center Stage. A two-actress character study, it examines the insular world of fiction writers and will run through Feb. 5.**

Nominations for both artistic and technical achievement in community-based theater in the metropolitan area over the past year will be announced this Sunday at the Birchmere in Arlington. The Washington Area Theatre Community Honors (WATCH) assigned judges to evaluate about 100 productions mounted in 2004 by 25 eligible theater companies in Virginia, Maryland and the District. Winners will be announced at a gala featuring more than 400 members of the local theater community on March 6, at the Birchmere.

Teatro de la Luna's Eighth International Festival of Hispanic Theater opens with a grand reception at the Embassy of Costa Rica on Feb. 9, before moving to the Gunston Arts Center Theater II. Troupes from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Spain will perform through March 19. Plays will be performed in Spanish, but many will have simultaneous English translation via headsets.

With February, local theater companies generally retreat into the comfort of familiar offerings for the rest of the cold months. But ambitious Tapestry Theatre Company stages Pearl Cleage's "Flyin' West" Feb. 3-19. It's the story of a small group of African American women whose lives changed when the American West was opened to settlers willing to risk life in a harsh region. And MetroStage brings back Helen Hayes Award-winner William Hubbard for "All Night Strut," celebrating music and dance of the 1930s and '40s. "All Night Strut" begins Feb. 16 at the North Alexandria theater.

Another highlight should be Tennessee Williams's "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore," which Christopher Henley will direct for Washington Shakespeare Company in Crystal City beginning March 3. In this rarely produced play, an aging woman is confronted by an enigmatic and attractive hustler as she writes her memoirs.

Trumpet Vine Theater Company also has unique entertainment scheduled as it continues its "Landscapes of Identity" season March 31 with "Hidden: A Gender," by playwright and performance artist Kate Bornstein, a male-to-female transsexual who questions and explores gender stereotypes in Western culture. The small troupe will follow that in June with Australian playwright David Stevens's play, "The Sum of Us," in which a gay man and his widowed father struggle with love.

The small Firebelly Productions theater company will unveil new material by local playwright and actor David Cahill, a recent graduate of American University who has appeared in several Firebelly productions. Two one-act plays, "Conversing Elevens" and "Dunce," open May 11 at Theater on the Run.
