

Play has Great Expectations

Great Expectations
Citadel Maclab Theatre
through November 27

review by Mike Spindloe

Barbara Field's stage adaptation of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, now playing at the Citadel, is a play which mirrors its own events in the effectiveness of its realization. That is to say, much like Pip, the central character, the play attempts to do too much and thus ends up succeeding only part of the time. This is more the fault of the dense script, which has all the actors doubling as narrators, and the direction, which has the actors scurrying around carrying a different set of props onstage for each scene, than the actors themselves.

Indeed, the entire cast can be commended for effectively bringing to life the full range of colourful Dickensian characters, from Kevin Hare's adult Pip to Dave Sayer's Wemmick (principally) and Stephen Sparks' Herbert Pocket. Most of the actors play at least two roles and some as many as four. Unfortunately, the female roles are of the one-dimensional nature one might expect of 19th century literature; most of the challenge lies in the male roles. For instance, Miss Havisham, played by Susan Sneath, is a bitter spinster who is defrauded and jilted by her fiance, and then wastes the rest of her life seeking revenge. Her lines are repetitive and shrill, and her eventual acknowledgement of her mistakes does little to compensate.

The play's biggest problem, however, is the sheer volume of information it attempts to communicate. Field was obviously convinced that the dialogue between characters was not enough to fill in the story, so she inserted narration between each scene (and often during them as well).

This in itself is not such a bad idea to fill in the myriad of details which complete the complex plot of *Great Expectations*. However, the narration is spread out among the cast, who spend much of the

play in the shadows in the corners of the stage, waiting to deliver these lines, which often end up sounding rushed. They pass the narration around like a football, in small bursts of words that rarely exceed a sentence in length. The effect is somewhat disorienting, especially until one gets used to the idea that is the narrator rather than the character speaking. At times, the narration does provide humour, such as when Pip, caught in an uncomfortable situation, uses the narrative voice to announce his own departure — as he leaves the stage.

The story is a tried and true one: Pip, orphaned and brought up by his sister and her blacksmith husband, is given the chance to become a gentleman by an unknown benefactor who wishes to remain anonymous. Pip's convenient but ultimately erroneous assumption that his benefactor is the person he hopes it will be provides the locus for most of the important events of his adult life and the bulk of the play.

Ironically, Pip becomes a victim of the machinations of both his real and imagined benefactors, even as he believes he is destined for success. On his way, he leaves behind the only people who really had his best interests at heart, and yet displays loyalty to and goes out of his way to help his friend and room-mate Herbert Pocket, for whom he anonymously arranges a partnership in a mercantile trading firm.

Pip is caught up in his own great expectations: "I scorned my most faithful friend for these expectations," he says, when he discovers who his benefactor really is. Yet his "betrayal" of Joe, his sister's blacksmith husband to whom he was apprenticed is not made to seem as reprehensible as it appears to be meant to be. When Pip leaves home for London, he is merely following a rarely given opportunity to leap the rigid class structure of 19th century England. Pip comes across more innocent than anything else; witness

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David or the usual "did you get laid on the weekend?", the drinking, the drugs, all this was really helpful to me... You go through the scene, figure out what this kid is going through and you internalize it.

Gateway: So there is a lot of drawing on personal highschool experience as a resource?

Dolha: Yes, as an actor does. Sometimes it can be unrelated things. The way Ruth Smillie works is incredible. She does very straight work, no bullshit, nor artsy fartsy la la la...no thinking that your character is a green bean that wanders through etc. She breaks the play down in units, then into action blocks, then for each action she assigns a verb like "to challenge" or "to push". You learn the lines and the verbs in rehearsal. Eventually, you take away the verbs and work with objectives — finding them and driving them straight through the scene. The interesting thing is that after a while it is almost like improv. You do not have to memorize how to say a line, 'cause you know why you are saying it.

Gateway: This gives the show a human spontaneity?

Dolha: Exactly, it changes every night. And you don't have to worry about being truthful, because you can't help it. It's so easy!...Surprisingly easy!

Gateway: Clearly *David for Queen* has been a pleasant experience.

Dolha: It was a wonderful experience. The cast were all so professional, so caring and giving. That is what makes a show. You can have some of the most talented people on Earth, but if they do not get along together — forget it.

Things are "movin' real fast" for Andrew Dolha, who will be around Edmonton doing commercials and such until February, when he will leave for Stratford, Ontario. *David for Queen* runs through December 4th at Theatre Network.



Colin Northcott

Young Pip is confronted by the escaped convict Magwitch in the Citadel's production of *Great Expectations*.

David sees through masks

David for Queen
Theatre Network/Catalyst Theatre
through December 4

review by Patricia Badir

The Theatre Network/Catalyst Theatre co-production of *David for Queen* which opened last Thursday screams painfully of authenticity. The work of director Ruth Smillie and her cast succeeds in turning the audience into a gymnasium full of awkward adolescents, horribly self-conscious of themselves — torn between who they are and who they think they should be. This truthful (though somewhat long and laboured) play by Canadian John Lazarus, discusses the trials of a young man coming to grips with his emerging homosexuality. But its scope is much larger as it encompasses the rites of passage that all teenagers contend with as they cringe through their high school years.

David is seventeen years old. He is good-looking, dresses well, is going out with the most popular girl in the school,

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and he is smart — he will probably go to Harvard. But, something is wrong and he knows what it is. David is gay; he has been hiding behind a mask and he can't take it any more. In an act of courage and rebellion, he decides to run for graduating class prom queen. However, exposing oneself to the world, especially the adolescent world is not a simple thing. David's feelings are censored and his body is threatened. The closet is a much safer place to be.

Andrew Dolha's David is a mirror reflection of the way things were. Sure, maybe we didn't all have to cope with being young and gay, but we all had to cope with being young. Dolha brings sincerity to this part through simple honesty. He not only tells how he feels but he shows it as well. In one scene he stands cowering between two desks in a doctor's office on the brink of revealing his heart, the audience holding its breath and finally breathing as he does. When David's world begins to move faster than he can, Dolha takes us through his character's chaotic experiences, showing us the fear that is omnipresent and the joy of self-discovery.

David's friends also struggle through his coming out. The initial feelings of betrayal, and the gradual understanding that both Brenda (Elizabeth Brown) and Slater (Raul Tome) undergo is well developed by both the text and the actors. Tome, as David's

hyper, girl-crazed buddy is "Grade Twelve", right down to his obnoxious use of the school auditorium microphone and his distortion of the French language: "Pardawnex moy". Brown's portrayal of the girl who must learn how to love David is strong, though at times her youthful exuberance is too much and undercuts the realism of her character.

Another good performance is turned in by Neil Grahn as Ratch. This guy is the school thug who seeks thrills in fag bashing and who worse yet, gets away with it. Grahn's "Rat Shit" is sickeningly evil but not so as to be unbelievable. He brings to the stage a horrible, violent attitude that manifests itself in speech and actions that we all know exist behind closed doors and like to pretend will go away. When he says to David: "I seen how you walk, I seen how you talk — you're sick," the audience shudders in recognition rather than disbelief.

An interesting convention is adopted by Smillie in her direction of the adult figures in the play. All four of them — David's parents, his principal and his teacher are played by only two actors. What results is a grouping together of all figures of authority and a presentation of adults not as they necessarily are, but larger than life — as their children see them.

Earl Klein plays the stuffed shirt principal who gets down to the kids' level and in so doing stomps all over their integrity. He may be encouraging equal rights on the surface but when he challenges David to "act like a man" one realizes that he is not ally of youth. Klein gives this part the large and artificial stiffness it needs. However he is not so successful as the pig-headed father, despite the humour he finds in the requisite "are you using protection" father-son scene. Julie Bond literally radiates as David's mother (God, those outfits!). We are annoyed by her chatter just as her son is, and wish that "she would just calm down". Yet when push comes to shove, Bond (who also plays the witchy teacher) gives this character an added dimension — depth of feeling. Despite her silly giggles and flowered pants, she comes across as a serious mother who wants her son to be safe.

Smillie's production is not flawless or perfectly smooth. However it has a truthful, human quality to it that comes through precisely because it is rough about the edges. Had she cultivated the slick and polished air of what one might call a more "professional" production it would not have had the power it has to attack, confront, challenge and hopefully change the world it criticizes.

There is one serious problem with *David for Queen*: not enough people are going to see it, and those who are, are too old. This is a play that teens should see and so should their teachers, their principals and their parents. Don't miss it, and here's "to masks coming off."