



Magic in the air in three Milwaukee shows

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(Photo: JT Backes Photography)

Aaron Kopec's Halloween shows win the popularity contest every year at Kopec's Alchemist Theatre; the large crowd watching Kopec's "Pepper's Ghost" alongside me on Friday the 13th suggests this year is no exception.

But even as we watch him peruse the actual script for this latest Halloween treat, Kopec surrogate Donald (David Sapiro) is complaining that his patrons only want chills and thrills, while he wants to write nuanced dialogue and tell compelling stories.

Stealing an idea dreamed up by his techie (Nate Press), what Donald does instead is con rich people into letting him give their houses a Halloween makeover: He'll provide the eerie special effects, mixing in some of that ancestral family history that makes the rich feel important. Like this show, the resulting high jinks can be funny (a goofy Press is especially so).

But as Alchemist has repeatedly made clear during its past decade of shows, a theatrical house has a life of its own; try to play it and it often winds up playing you instead. As Halloween reminds us each year, we think we're playing a game of make-believe for which we know all the rules, until we get spooked for real.

What begins as a series of deliberately cheesy sight and sound gags morphs into a psychologically intense meditation on the ghosts haunting every closet. Give those specters an inch and they're likely to take everything, including one's soul. Kopec himself makes a creepy cameo to remind us that the past we'd thought we'd repressed continues to haunt the present.

"Pepper's Ghost" occasionally grows dense and loses its way after intermission. But it's often entertaining and consistently intriguing, with Sapiro and April Paul leading the way. Big on the theme that time is relative, it successfully makes time fly, in more ways than I can fairly disclose.

'Bell, Book and Candle'

Halloween is also in the air at the Brumder Mansion, home to Milwaukee Entertainment Group and its just-opened production of John Van Druten's "Bell, Book and Candle," a 1950 Broadway hit that Hollywood adapted into a forgotten gem of a movie starring James Stewart and Kim Novak.

Shep Henderson (Randall Anderson) is an aging bachelor entranced by Gillian Holroyd (Libby Amato), a witch who must decide whether she's willing to give up her special powers and become human, allowing her to fall in love for real. Think Liz Shippe's wonderful "Upon a Midnight Clear," a onetime MEG production offering a variation on this theme.

A prolific but now sadly forgotten playwright, Van Druten acknowledged that dramatic structure wasn't his strong suit; the MEG production bears this out. But Van Druten wrote a number of strong female characters, and Gillian is emphatically among them.

Amato most fully captures Gillian's intelligence and appeal in witty exchanges with fellow witches – Gillian's aunt (a quirky, lovable Beth Perry) and brother (an impish Jason Nykiel) – and with a disheveled, perpetually drunk author writing about witchcraft (Michael Keiley).

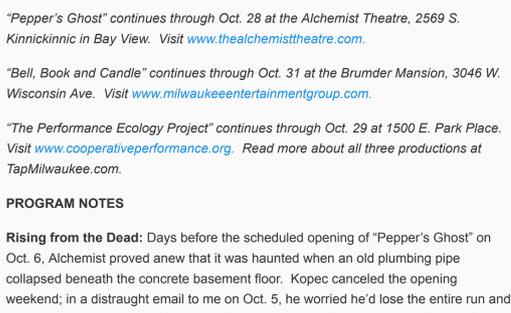
But there's little chemistry between Amato and Anderson, whose labored scenes make one wonder why Gillian would ever give up her captivating life and special power for what looks to be a boring marriage.

Truth be told, Van Druten may have wondered as much himself. A closeted gay man, his play poses the Hobson's choice – confronting 1950s heterosexual women as well as 1950s gays and lesbians – between a safe if loveless marriage and an often lonely existence as an outcast in a marginalized subculture.

No wonder Amato's Gillian can suggest Blanche DuBois while seeming restless, forlorn and lost. As she asks Shep at one point, "what can a nice girl do?"

Into the woods

The magic in Cooperative Performance's season-opening show takes place outside, in the nature preserve abutting the Urban Ecology Center. Brainchild of Jeff Grygny and directed by Brian Rott, "The Performance Ecology Project" features six performers – Sarah Best, JJ Gatesman, Hesper Juhnke and Kavon Jones, Hesper Juhnke, Jessi Miller and Ben Yela – sharing their version of "Walden."



Sarah Best, JJ Gatesman, Hesper Juhnke and Kavon Jones stick close together in "The Performance Ecology Project." (Photo: Jeff Grygny)

During five consecutive Saturdays, this sextet engaged in somatic exercises involving yoga, tai chi, mindfulness, dance and theater games before heading into the woods to commune with nature. While there, they'd create vignettes and write songs, going home afterward to journal on what they'd experienced.

Grygny and Rott then shaped this material into a one-hour piece, which the audience enjoys after being led through a mini-version of the somatic exercises the troupe had done.

Having held yoga poses during which I buzzed like a mosquito, crouched like a squirrel and snarled like a bear, I took my place around a campfire and watched this cast impersonate these and other creatures, while channeling Italo Calvino to chronicle the history of the universe and ecologist Stephan Harding to urge that we learn to better love the earth.

Some of it played like overly precious and obscure theater exercises, but the best of it was a moving reminder of all we've lost and fail to notice as we stare at our phones rather than the world around us. Musician Jahmes Finlayson added numerous twangling instruments, underscoring the enchantment of this magical island in the heart of urban Milwaukee.

"Pepper's Ghost" continues through Oct. 28 at the Alchemist Theatre, 2569 S. Kinnickinnic in Bay View. Visit www.thealchemisttheatre.com.

"Bell, Book and Candle" continues through Oct. 31 at the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. Visit www.milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com.

"The Performance Ecology Project" continues through Oct. 29 at 1500 E. Park Place. Visit www.cooperativeperformance.org. Read more about all three productions at TapMilwaukee.com.

PROGRAM NOTES

Rising from the Dead: Days before the scheduled opening of "Pepper's Ghost" on Oct. 6, Alchemist proved anew that it was haunted when an old plumbing pipe collapsed beneath the concrete basement floor. Kopec canceled the opening weekend; in a distraught email to me on Oct. 5, he worried he'd lose the entire run and might even need to close Alchemist altogether. Instead he issued a public plea for help and raised more than \$8,000 in a single week, through contributions from more than 130 people, including many members of the Milwaukee theater community.

It's a great story, on behalf of a company that's become an indispensable part of the Milwaukee theater scene. In addition to its own original programming, Alchemist plays host to numerous smaller theater troupes without homes of their own; I can't count the number of memorable productions playing at Alchemist over the past decade that I'd have never otherwise seen. There's a few references to the terrors of the Alchemist basement in "Pepper's Ghost"; they drew chuckles from the audience watching alongside me.

Remembrance of Things Past: Kopec's title ostensibly haunts to the Peppers (Nathan Danzer and April Paul), rich owners of the home being haunted here. But it's also a term of art for a low-tech special effect allowing one to conjure images – sort of an afterglow – through little more than light and a sheet of plexiglass.

In a similar sense, Kopec's play is itself a semi-transparent glass reflecting on past Alchemist shows, lingering on through Easter eggs implanted in this one. A few examples: Actors Liz Whitford and Sammi Kaufman play siblings, here, much as they did in "Suicide Sleep," Kopec's 2014 Halloween show. Whitford has a blood-curling scream at one point that recalls her bloody demise in Alchemist's "The Canonical Five of Jack the Ripper" (2013). Sapiro and Paul again have the chemistry that made them so good together in Kopec's "Another Tale of Eddie" (2013), referenced in "Pepper's Ghost."

The Other 1950s Witch Hunt: "What is it?," the straight-faced Shep asks Gillian, as she tries to come clean about her life as a witch. "What have you been up to? Have you been engaging in un-American activities?"

It's one of many reminders that "Bell, Book and Candle" opened on Broadway during the same year that McCarthy launched the Red Scare – and the same year that the Republican Party's national chairman alleged that "sexual perverts who have infiltrated our Government in recent years" were as dangerous as "real" Communists. The FBI played an active role in the ensuing Lavender Scare that led almost 600 federal workers to be fired by November 1950 because they were suspected of being gay.

"Bell, Book and Candle" opened that year on Nov. 14. Patricia Highsmith, herself gay, was then putting the finishing touches on her perceptive and often heartbreaking "The Price of Salt," a novel about a covert and condemned lesbian love affair that Highsmith was forced to publish under a pseudonym.

"You end up in a little world of separateness from everyone," Gillian laments, speaking of her underground life as a witch in Manhattan. In choosing a square like Shep she crosses to safety. But she pays a price.

The Things We Do For Love: What makes "Bell, Book and Candle" so interesting – and poignant – is that it also clearly wants to believe in the love affair between Shep and Gillian. To again invoke Blanche DuBois – a much more complex but still recognizable version of Gillian, in a play written just a few years before "Bell, Book and Candle" – Gillian wants to believe in her relationship with Shep every bit as much as Blanche wants to make things work with Mitch. And because Van Druten is writing a comedy, he ultimately wants us to believe it, too. I do, when watching the 1958 movie; not so much, in the MEG production.

Cooperative Performance: Along with Quasimondo Milwaukee Physical Theatre – for which Rott serves as artistic director – Cooperative Performance does as much as any Milwaukee theater troupe to push the boundaries of what theater can be in the future by taking us back to its past, when theater emerged from the ritualistic dance performed each year in Athens. I've seen nearly every show Cooperative Performance has performed during its three-plus years, true to its mission to "provide artists a forum to experiment, creating original works and innovative performances not otherwise attainable through traditional means of production" while "inspiring deeper thought and discussion into the issues concerning our communities – both local and global." It occupies an important niche in the ecosystem known as Milwaukee theater.

A Tree in the Forest: I was most taken in this show by the performers' rudeness, root-free. Jessi Miller recreates a tree's evolution from seed and saplings to embolism, foot-expanding giant. Later, Hesper Juhnke depicts a young tree that Miller – now a pipe-smoking, woods-clearing pioneer for whom trees are an obstacle to be removed – tries in vain to take down.

Filled with a new respect for this formidable foe, Miller decides to take a hard look at the tree instead; locking eyes with Juhnke, she lives what we're told: sometimes the eyes see things that the brain does not. Or as Stephan Holden insists in "Animate Earth" – one of the texts inspiring this piece – perhaps we should spend less time thinking and more time paying attention to what we intuit, sense and feel, so that we might live in harmony with the world and ourselves rather than systematically destroying both.

Looking Back with Windfall Theatre: Alchemist, MEG and Cooperative Performance aren't the only smaller, comparatively unheralded troupes kicking off a new season. So has Carol Zippel's splendid Windfall Theatre, and I'd be remiss if I didn't take a moment to celebrate the opening show in its 25th anniversary season: the just-closed "Wittenberg," a play by David Davalos that I saw during the final week of the run. Davalos' conceit: Before young Hamlet returned to Denmark to fulfill his tragic role in Shakespeare's play, he spent his college days in

Wittenberg learning from intellectual rivals Luther and Faustus during the climactic year of 1517, when Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door. Davalos borrows liberally from both "Hamlet" and Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" to tell his tale.

I emerged from a fun night enjoyed alongside a large and enthusiastic audience feeling much as I had when watching Windfall's first production of "Wittenberg" five years ago: while Davalos occasionally takes a good idea too far and gets talky, the smart and often funny dialogue between Faustus (Bo Johnson) and Luther (Emmitt Morgans) – with Hamlet (Kyle Conner) caught in the middle – is a treat. Adeptly inhabiting multiple female roles, Jocelyn Ridgely rounded out the Windfall cast, under Zippel's crisp direction.

For more information on upcoming Windfall shows – including a timely November reading of John Osborne's "Luther" – visit www.windfalltheatre.com/.

Looking Forward with Off the Wall Theatre: One of the most renowned of Milwaukee's smaller companies is Dale Gutzman's Off the Wall Theatre, which kicks off its new season this week with Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a magical play that's expressly invoked in "Bell, Book and Candle." Gutzman's "Midsummer" is a mashup featuring Shakespeare and Cole Porter, in a strong cast that includes David Flores, Ben George, Robert Hirschi, Liz Mistele, Laura Monagle, Alicia Rice and Jeremy C. Welter. Working with far less money, Gutzman's Off the Wall understands and does Shakespeare more creatively than any theater company in Milwaukee. Running through Oct. 29, this mid-fall version of "Midsummer" opens Wednesday night; look for my review shortly thereafter. Visit <https://zivacat.com/OffTheWallTheatre/>.

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