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Theater: 'The Nerd' brings laughs to Bucks County Playhouse



The Nerd (Courtesy Photo)

By Ted Otten

Controversial 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, "There are slavish souls who carry their appreciation for favors done them so far that they strangle themselves with the rope of gratitude," and, although Nietzsche wrote a century before playwright/actor Larry Shue created and starred in his zany play, "The Nerd," now running at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse through July 15, he could easily be describing the actions of this play's main character.

There's an important backstory to the play. While Willum Cubbert was serving in Vietnam, he was severely wounded, but his life was saved by Rick Steadman, a man who took Willum to safety in spite of being wounded himself. Willum - and since this is a chummy kind of play, everyone is referred to by first names - never met Rick then, but the two have corresponded occasionally, and Willum, practicing that admirable virtue of gratitude, promised Rick that he could come to him at any time for help.

The action takes place in the home of Willum (played by Kyle Cameron) in Terra Haute, Indiana in 1980. Willum is an architect currently working on an important commission from dull but prosperous businessman Warnock Waldgrave (Grant Shaud) who owns eight hotels. Willum's life is frequented by two of his close friends, TV meteorologist Tanzy McGinnis (Clea Alsip) and drama critic Axel Hammond (Gavin Lee) who are also his tenants. Rick Steadman (Joe Kinosian) arrives at Willum's doorstep, and Willum, remembering his promise, takes Rick in, but the socially inept Rick proves to live up to the worst possible definition of the play's title.

On the evening of a dinner party given for the Waldgraves - who include wife Clelia (Zuzanna Szadkowski) and son Thor (Avey Noble), identified by Axel as "the poster child for planned parenthood" - things quickly deteriorate into comic chaos.

Playing Rick Steadman is a dream come true for actor Joe Kinosian who appeared at the end of 2016 at BCP. Last December, he was half the cast of "Murder for Two, a Killer Musical: Holiday Edition," a play he co-wrote. Since 2011, he has performed in that show's non-holiday edition over 600 times, recorded a cast CD, and had the joy of seeing his play produced throughout the county and internationally too. "After the national tour wrapped after two years on the road," said Kinosian, "it was done in Japan, and I got to see it there in Japanese. I was euphoric! I was also sent the script in Spanish when it was done in Argentina.

"I'm from Wisconsin, home of Milwaukee Rep where Shue's play premiered in 1981," said Kinosian, "and in the cast was a local actor named James Pickering who was my hero growing up. In junior high, I had a teacher who was friends with Pickering, and, when she told him what a fan I was, she got him to autograph his copy of the script and write in it, 'Best wishes for a career in the theatre,' and I've treasured that through all my moves, about fourteen times, from one apartment to another. I also got to see James Pickering star in 'The Foreigner,' Larry Shue's other famous play.

"In the eighties, the word nerd meant someone who had to be avoided at all costs, and here, Rick makes it very difficult for those who want to love him. He has the same mid-Western accent I had when I went to college in Georgia and got mocked mercilessly for my vowel sounds. I especially enjoy becoming Rick because it gives me license to be annoying and disruptive. I'm the kid in the sandbox being strange. I love my entrance in the party scene when Rick shows up dressed in a monster costume because he thinks it's a Halloween costume party," said Kinosian.

Gavin Lee, who was nominated for an Olivier Award in London and a Tony Award on Broadway for playing Bert in "Mary Poppins," plays Willum's friend Axel, an often cynical and sometimes tipsy drama critic who plays a perhaps cruel but ultimately productive trick on Willum whom he believes has an unacted upon love for Tansy. Lee, a native Londoner, now lives in New Jersey and is new to New Hope. "In rehearsal with director Marc Vietor, we had to change a few period references, but we're all dressed in lovely seventies gear, and I'm enjoying wearing corduroy flares," Lee joked, but he takes his character very seriously.

"It's easy to simplify Axel by calling him the sarcastic best friend. When I first read the script, I noticed that every other line Axel said was just dripping with irony and sarcasm, and he undercuts what other people say. But I've come to see that Axel really loves his friends and wants only the best for them even though they may be too shy to see for themselves what he has in mind. He wants Willum to change and jump-start his life, but I have to be careful not to give away too much of the plot. That's a delight audiences should discover for themselves," said Lee.

Playing Mrs. Waldgrave is Zuzanna Szadkowski whom audiences might recognize from her several seasons on TV's "Gossip Girl." She appeared previously at BCP in "The Vagina Monologues," but that, she says, "was years and years ago."

"Clelia is a very overstressed teacher, mom and wife and is great fun to play because I think so many people can identify with her. She tries to be enthusiastic, sociable and affable, and although she tries to hold everything together, everything is falling apart underneath. She's very maternal, but she has a nightmare of a son. In her heart, she's a social person and loves being at Willum's party. She does get a moment of relief when she gets to break something small, and I think I've fallen in love with her. "The play is laugh out loud funny," said Szadkowski, "and it's a great joy to be in."

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, PA

When: through July 15; Tuesday through Thursday at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

How much: Tickets are \$40 to \$75; group rates for 10 or more

Contact: (215) 862 - 2121 or at buckscountyplayhouse.org.