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## Taking a theatrical break from all that holiday cheer - "Little Women" and "Gilgamisha"

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FRED KAUFMAN  
DECEMBER 5, 2016

Read More: Gilgamisha, Hanover County Cultural Arts Center, Little Women, TheatreLAB, Whistletop Theatre



Bottom Line: There is more to see in town than Christmas plays. Go feed your soul and your mind as well.

Christmas plays are great. Family oriented and appropriately festive. They are, however, exactly as you'd expect: inconsequential lightweight comedies without depth or meaningful conflict.



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question

### How often do you hide your sexuality?

- Never - I'm out and everyone knows
- When I'm at work or school - I'm not out there
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- When I'm with work and family, but I'm out to my friends
- I'm still in the closet and not out at all

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Just as man does live by bread alone, you can only take so much Holiday Cheer, no matter how well done. I can listen to 98.1 on my radio for ten minutes and then I get diabetic.

If you look real hard there are other theatrical treasures to enjoy this Christmas Season. Two worth seeing are Little Women presented by [Whistle Stop Theatre Company](#) in Ashland at the [Hanover County Cultural Arts Center](#) and Gilgamisha, the first outing of the “On Book” interactive play festival at [TheatreLab](#).

Little Women, is of course Louisa May Alcott’s novel of the March sisters, Jo, Beth, Meg and Amy, whose father is fighting the Civil War leaving the women to keep the home fires burning.

If you’ve never been to Ashland to see a Whistlestop production, you’re missing something special. Producer Louise Ricks is one of the most hardworking producers in the area, making the most out of the limited budget and resources she has. Best of all, she is dedicated to original children’s stories produced authentically before they were adapted by Hollywood.

The production of Little Women is at the Hanover Cultural Arts Center which used to be a Civil War hospital in the day and so gives an extra layer to the play’s authenticity.

Whistle Stop has scored a coup in utilizing the directorial talents of James Ricks, who gave us one of the most electrifying theatrical experiences of the season with his original play Ubu 84, which he also directed for The Firehouse Theatre.

Ricks stages the play in the round in a tight space and impresses with all the ways he uses it. No less a feat is staging as many as 7 people in the space and having it not appear cramped.

As impressive are the performances he elicits from his young cast. Mixed with professionals and amateurs, each one gives a studied and delightful performance. The dynamics between four sisters can be elusive to capture on stage, but Ricks and his cast find those nuances that anyone with a sister can recognize.

Ms. Ricks took the lead role of Jo and brought spirited tomboy fun to the character. Renee McGowan played Meg, Evelyn Dumeer was Amy, Nancy Collie played Beth, and Patrick Bellow gave us the handsome neighbor Mr. Laurie, with Barbara and Craig Keeton as Ma and Pa March. John Alley provided lovely guitar accompaniment throughout.

The matinee performance was part of the “Light Up the Tracks” festival in downtown Ashland but the play also runs for two more weeks, on Thursday December 8th and 15th and Friday December 9th and 16th. Bring your children.

I wouldn’t have advised bringing your children to The Epic of Gilgamisha, the introductory entry in TheatreLab’s series “On Book, an Interactive Play Festival.”

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FRIEND ACTIVITY



The Epic of Gilgamisha has mature themes, foul language and frequent psychological overload during its intense 90 minutes. No need to frighten the little ones.

“On Book” is a program and platform for playwrights, particularly local playwrights to incubate their work. The process usually involves a workshop period where the playwright and his artistic partners make changes to benefit a full scale production.

This year TheatreLab chose local playwright Dante Piro’s script The Epic of Gilgamisha.

Gilgamisha is based on the poem “The Epic of Gilgamesh” (written c. 2150-1400 BCE).

Gilgamesh is the great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work which pre-dates Homer’s writing by 1500 years and, therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic western literature.

Epic poems have no real author. By the time they are written down they have been told mouth to mouth for decades, sometimes centuries.

Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic King of Uruk, a proud and arrogant king who is punished by the Gods with tragic events that cause him to fall into a deep grief. Recognizing his own mortality, he questions the meaning of life and the value of human accomplishment in the face of ultimate extinction. Babylonian Existentialism. Surprisingly still relevant.

Piro’s attempts to weave these themes using the work as a touchstone in creating the images and rhythms of his modern world.

His “epic” is domestic. People we recognize questioning motives and values. Exposing pettiness and jealousies. Slipping into madness.

The “reading” I saw was very well put together. Zach Owen, a talented young director seems to have had his fingers on Piro’s artistic pulse. The transitioning from reality to “un” was handled cleanly and without a great deal of fuss. The actors were let loose to explore the boundaries of their characters.

The program featured a questionnaire that asked the audience member to give written suggestions about things good theatre analysts ask when they review a production:

Was the themes/characters/plots fully realized? What lines need to be cut? Which are essential?

Piro has a solid foundation to work on. It would be presumptuous to give a public opinion. (I liked it.) Piro deserves his process. He’s in the right place and with the right people to do that. He will find refinement. Conciseness. Clarity.

Two plays, both in small venues, both based on revered literature, miles apart as pieces of theatre. Both excellent side trips from all that tinsel and fake snow.

“Elf” comes up- next at the Altria on December 9. Then we can all go back to our regularly scheduled theatre season.

Top image credit: Robert Papas

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JULY 18, 2016

- A ‘Simpsons’ episode becomes mythic legend in a post apocalyptic world in TheatreLAB’s ‘Mr.Burns: A Post-Electric Play’, JULY 13, 2016
- TheatreLab and Deanna Danger premiere new jazz/burlesque series on Saturday, JUNE 9, 2016
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