

# *The Thanksgiving Play*

By Larissa FastHorse

## *Some Director Notes and Thoughts*

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

-variously attributed to: Samuel Johnson, John Ray, Henry Bohn, Ben Franklin, and, especially, St. Bernard of Charlivaux (!?)

Logan and the gang have good intentions. They seem to have a road. Hell eventually comes, especially (presumably) for their grade school audience who would, by now, not be surprised that they were forced to watch a diorama of American history through the lens of Samuel Beckett (and other sporty nihilists.)

There are lots of good reasons why this play has been one of the most produced pieces in the U.S. in the last couple of years. It's sharp, clever, purveys much high-brow- and a little low-brow comedy, and provides an avenue on which white artists can do a play by a POC/Indigenous writer, without having to face the conundrum of casting it with POC's. I will note and call attention to the fact that M. FastHorse has explained this as one of her main intentions, having developed a number of excellent pieces that were hardly produced because Theatre Companies X, Y, and Z “couldn't cast them.”

I am also intrigued by the playwright's success in bringing some new cleverness and zip(!) to the well-worn path of the “play about doing a play” genre. From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Noises Off* with many, many stops in-between (and before and after) there seems to be something eternally attractive about watching the process of developing performance—especially when said process is fraught with over-eagerness, misunderstanding, fragile egos bumping, and a lot of angst. As have the best of the genre, this piece captures the desperation, the ticking clock, the external expectations and pressures, and the \*good intentions\* of likeable dorks, all of which help us root for them despite their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. Fasthorse also brings in another, and crucially important, meta-narrative that both allows and forces us to grapple with our own biases, cultural appropriations, and guilt WHILE WE WORK ON HER PLAY. Brilliant. And humbling. And very funny.

These “plays about doing plays” in general, and this one in particular, also lay lots of traps for people brave enough to do them. We shall endeavor mightily to avoid them because, as we know, there is nothing worse than a poorly delivered one of these beasts. Here are a few:

--“Eager and earnest” are REAL things, not indicated or “I'm playing it” things.

--WE CANNOT MAKE FUN OF or look down our nose at these people. Doing so brings in an ‘arch’ or ‘sarcastic’ vibe that kills comedy. Logan and Jaxton and Alicia and Caden are sarcastic to each other.... But we have to love and embrace them.

--there is a fine line between comedy and tragedy(!) Great comedies like this one (and good productions of them) live on that line. Everything hangs in the balance if they don't find their way. Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but the charm and snarky fun and love lives in the striving.

--The characters get sweaty. The actors shouldn't, much. One of the most common problematic choices in this kind of work is finding everyone working so hard that the working is all a viewer can see or hear. Sweaty, grinding, overly-emphatic, acting is not good acting. In comedies, nor in tragedies, actually....

--Timing. Sharpness is key but, again, not ‘sweatily.’!

--“Sweaty” and “timing” and “fine-line/tragedy” wind around URGENCY. Sometimes that will mean going faster, but mostly it will mean seriousness of purpose and engaging in the needs striven for by the characters.

Needless to say, there is a whole other field of traps waiting for us in the technology of working in this platform. We're all on a steep learning curve, exploring how each of our machines and gear can work best at the individual and, most importantly, communal levels. Further conversation will sort out what each of us has at hand in our plague-home-performing-spaces in terms of equipment and how we can maximize its efficiency or supplement its capacity. No matter how much ‘horse-power’ we are applying to the equation, however, here's one thing we know going in: there is a built-in delay in the exchange of words. We will endeavor to find how best to slightly anticipate when to come in, without stepping on the intrinsic comedy/punchlines or strangling

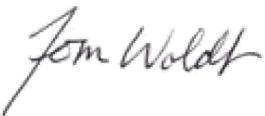
the sound electronically. As you likely know, when two or more people speak on top of each other in the digi-world, both are typically squeezed by a mangled (unpleasant) growl or screech.

This project will also bring us into the evolving conversations about “what’s the difference between a ‘reading’ and a ‘production’, especially as presented online?” This is one of our FRESH PRODUCE Concert Readings, so... it’s a ‘reading.’ Were we doing this in-person, we would be using music stands, no props, down-stage focal point/s (as opposed to looking at the person standing beside one), and the \*suggestion\* of action, gesture, movement. Therefore we want to start with these protocols: focal point directly in the camera (downstage) with slight adjustments left or right or up/down if changing one’s focus from one character to another within a scene; camera framing from about top-of-shoulder with head/face in the middle of the frame, like a good headshot; suggestion of props (no need for bloody heads props!) That said, we will also investigate: similar (probably neutral) backgrounds in each actor’s acting studio/abode; clothing and hair that ‘suggests’ the vibe; potential weird hand-made items for head and face gear for the musical interludes—like construction paper turkeys or “Indian Head-dress” that kids make in school or at home... All subject to further contemplation, discovery, etc....

It is important to note (and, again, state the obvious—that’s what directors do, right?) that a lot has changed in our world and our cultural milieu since this play was created. I mean.... A lot. While some of the ironies and dark humor may seem almost quaint now, I think we can all agree that we have not, by any measure, ‘resolved’ the social problems this piece throws up in our face. The plight of Indigenous People of this land, including but-not-limited-to the complexities of lots-of-peoples'-favorite-holiday, Thanksgiving, is not now nor ever has it been, the highest priority of even the most committed cultural do-gooders. TheatreMidwest, given both our geography and mission, has an opportunity and a duty to engage in this discussion.

These and many other discoveries (and lots of laughs) to be discovered soon!

10-17-2020

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Woldt". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.