

ity and inborn femininity are indeed realities, not “artificial constructs.” They came too late for David Reimer.

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THEATER

Exeunt Metrosexuals

by James Moses

A Midsummer Night's Dream

*Directed by Peter Dobbins
Written by William Shakespeare
Stage Manager: Joe Danbusky
Produced by the Storm Theatre*

Trust

*Directed by Erica Schmidt
Written by Gary Mitchell
Stage Manager: Megan Smith
Produced by The Play Company
at the Kirk Theatre*

When a former professional football player turns actor, the inclination is to set the bar rather low. Think O.J. Simpson as the security guard in *The Towering Inferno*. For that matter, think Dr. Johnson on female preachers.

I couldn't help myself, however, so I purchased a ticket to a production at the Storm Theatre in Times Square to see the once-explosive, virtually untacklable Hall-of-Fame fullback John Riggins utterly flop on his face in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* playing, of all things, Nick Bottom.

Funny. This offbeat guy, who sported a Mohawk haircut in the 1970's as a New York Jet and was the bane of NFL defensive lines in the early 1980's as he led the Washington Redskins to two Super Bowls, didn't flop—on face or bottom. He was superb.

Start with the first rehearsal, or, rather, discussion about rehearsal of that marvelously silly play-within-the-play, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby*. Riggins' character wishes to do all the parts in the play by the “rude mechanicals” (in Eliz-

abethan terminology, such “rude” occupations as carpenter, weaver, bellows mender, joiner, tinker, and tailor), but his is an endearing egotism that seeks to lead his fellow would-be thespians gently to their great moment at the Athenian court of Theseus.

In the middle of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania, Queen of the Fairies, awakens under the influence of a magic spell to find herself irresistibly attracted to the rather grotesque Bottom, who has himself been supernaturally transformed into an ass. And his, ahem, ass is broad enough to fill the stage and rivet the attention.

His reaction to Titania's passionate expression of love is skeptical, to say the least: “Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays” (Act 3, Scene 1). Bottom here iterates that constant Shakespearean truth: the incompatibility of heart and head.

Throughout the comedy, the supernatural or metaphysical is associated with *eros*, because, for Shakespeare (and certainly, other great dramatists), amorous desire is irrational, remaining oblivious to parental disapproval, legal sanction, and even cruel rejection by the beloved, and desire always wins out.

Of course, love potions altering the real-life affections of the main characters makes for some almost slapstick comedic moments. The Hermia-Helena duel would, in any staging of the play, be one such confrontation, but, on this night, there was tittering from all in the audience when budding actress and tall, stately, beautiful Miss America 1998 (yes, it was celeb night at the Storm) Kate Shindle, playing Helena, declared in Act 2, Scene 2, “I am as ugly as a bear / For beasts that meet me run away for fear.”

Miss Shindle was good, not great, in the role, which may be traceable to her performance having that studied aspect of a Miss America aspirant declaiming Keats or Emily Dickinson for that perfunctory two-minute segment in the talent run-up to the pageant's swimsuit competition.

Once, at the end of a Reagan-era gala dinner, John Riggins, football player, decked out in tie and tux, found himself sprawled beneath the table, completely sozzled. He looked up at Associate Justice O'Connor and said, “Loosen up, Sandy baby.”

Good advice for a Miss America. Bet-

ter advice for Sandra Day.

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Someone who can always be counted on to knock back a few is Geordie, the macho lead character in North Belfast playwright Gary Mitchell's excellent *Trust*.

Geordie, played brilliantly by Ritchie Coster, is no mere lager lout. In fact, he always has his wits about him as the coolly calculating neighborhood chieftain of a Protestant paramilitary gang.

Geordie plays the game of political intrigue well, but the part of father to son Jake vexes him throughout the drama. Geordie wants the adolescent to stand up for himself in schoolyard confrontations (as well as to drink like a man), but he will not stick up for the young man because strong-arm tactics, all too easy to command in his line of work, could bring the constabulary down hard on him and his cell of activists. So, home life festers, despite the fact that Pop is always grabbing the missus for a quick smooch on those occasions when the soccer match or Britcom on the telly aren't enough to distract.

Yet he can never be in a clinch for long, because his political family spends as much time in the house as his real one. Seeking favors, deals, trying to stay on his good side are Julie, the good-time girl with the British soldier boyfriend willing to steal weapons from his own base to sell to Geordie for the money to keep Julie; Artty, his sidekick and accomplice in the effort to make their idea of a man out of Jake; and the dimwit ex-con Trevor, a combustible mix of servility and uncontrollable temper who is really into “orange,” you might say: He has “UDA” (Ulster Defence Association) tattooed into the side of his neck.

If you can get past the almost constant use of a once-shocking Anglo-Saxonism—and who can't, because that's the unfortunate way they speak throughout the British Isles today, to the disappointment of my rampant literary and historical Anglophilia—this is a heck of a play that builds to an entirely unanticipated and, indeed, terrifying climax.

Donald Lyons of the *New York Post* said that Gary Mitchell is “a dramatist to watch.” He is that, as is this splendid seven-member ensemble, most of whose members are Yanks, yet with amazingly precise Anglo-Irish accents. Paula Prather is a dialect coach, if not to watch, then certainly to admire.

James Moses writes from New York City.

MUSIC

Answering the Call

by Aaron D. Wolf

Brand New Strings

by Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder
Recorded and mixed at
Skaggs Place Studios
Produced by Ricky Skaggs

When Lester Flatt's health began to decline in 1979, he was sure of one thing: All those years, when he was playing Gospel songs with Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs, he had been an unbeliever. Faith, however, comes by hearing, so, after a life spent resisting the call of Christ, mediated through the ancient tones of the music of his ancestors, Mr. Flatt, like the Ethiopian eunuch, was ready to have his sins washed away. Down in his hometown of Sparta, Tennessee, his preacher took him out to a familiar creek, where he helped Lester out of his wheelchair and down into the water in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. "Oh, why did I wait so long?" he began to exclaim as he emerged from the water, weeping at the thought of his new birth here at the end of his life.

Ricky Skaggs, chief among Bill Monroe's disciples, has been a mandolin and fiddle virtuoso nearly all of his life, having played with Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, and Ralph and Carter Stanley by the age of ten. Now, at 50, he is devoting himself to spreading both the good news that bluegrass is as good as ever and the Good News of Christ. Like Flatt, though, Skaggs took a few detours before heading back home.

In the late 70's, Skaggs felt compelled to leave the old homestead of bluegrass for the bright lights of Nashville. He toured with Emmylou Harris before embarking on his own stellar career, in which he was named the 1985 CMA entertainer of the year and garnered eight Grammys and numerous number ones for such singles as "Cajun Moon" and "Don't Cheat in Our Hometown." Though it wasn't bluegrass, it was country with a traditionalist twist, which caused Chet Atkins to say that, in the 1980's, Ricky Skaggs single-handedly saved country music. (Las Vegas lounge singer Lee Greenwood had been named CMA male vocalist of the year in 1984.)

By 1996, it was safe to say that Ricky

Skaggs had gone places. But the music of his people was calling him home. He wanted to record more and more folk tunes, but Epic, his label, wasn't interested. So Skaggs did "the best thing I've ever done": He started his own record label and "came out of the wilderness of country music into the promised land of bluegrass." (That was well before the bluegrass/newgrass/roots revival that followed the 2000 release of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) Ever since, he's been tearing through the studio and across the country, recording one fine album after another, including his blazing 2003 offering *Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder: Live at the Charleston Music Hall*.

Brand New Strings, Skaggs' latest, is a quieter, more reflective record. Only once, in the title cut, does it approach the tempo of *Live*, relying instead on powerful lyrics and haunting melodies to carry the day. In *Strings*, Skaggs follows his familiar formula for his bluegrass albums, combining old standards with his own instrumentals and the best work of his songwriting friends who share his philosophy: a deep commitment to native place, a love for home and family life, an enjoyment of the simple things, and faith in the Savior. ("I'm a sucker for a new song that has that old sound to it.")

Brand New Strings kicks off with Rusty and Doug Kershaw's "Sally Jo," one of Monroe's favorites. Rusty Kershaw played guitar on Monroe's original recording of the song, where he "whipped that guitar like a mule." Kentucky Thunder member Cody Kilby, Skaggs' "gun for hire," does plenty of his own whipping on this cut, and Jim Mills, a repeat winner of the International Bluegrass Association's banjo player of the year award, shines here.

The original songs capture, to various degrees, a traditional bluegrass sound, and each one is true to its ethos. "Sis Draper" (Guy Clark and Shawn Camp) tells of a mythic fiddling enchantress from Arkansas, who sings and plays with magnolias in her hair. The lyrics are fun, especially against the Cajun-leaning accompaniment. "Sis Draper is her daddy's daughter / Plays the fiddle that he bought her / Plays it like her Mammy taught her / She's a travelin' Arkansas-er."

Even better is "If I Had It All Again to Do," the first-person account of a man who leaves his old homestead, which was "good enough for my Dad and his daddy, too," because that's what boys do nowadays to be successful. "It's where seven generations made their living and their life / I would

be the first to move away," he says, which made me think of Skaggs leaving for Nashville and my own grandparents leaving the Ozark hills for work in Illinois. "I still see Mom and Daddy as they waved me good-bye / And the painful tears running down their face." How many old Southerners I have heard express the same sentiment, thinking about their parents' graves hundreds of miles away, about the creeks and hollers where they fished and hunted, as they look across the ever-increasing megapolopolis of Greater Chicagoland. "I'd sure make a world of changes / If I had it all again to do."

Included on *Brand New Strings* is a fuller version of one of my favorites from Skaggs' country days, a bluegrass number originally recorded for a silly Patrick Swayze movie, *Next of Kin*, but dropped by the film's producers. In "My Father's Son," Skaggs captures the pride of rural mountain people who are pleased to be known by their family names, the antidote to "If I Had It All Again to Do." "My history is no secret—it's written in the stones / In the hill beside this river rests my mother's gentle bones." Pride in one's parents, in one's kin, is a rare quality these days, and it is refreshing to hear it celebrated: "When they lay me down, remind them / I was just my father's son."

The best track on this record is "Why Did I Wait So Long?"—one of those new songs that sounds old. Inspired by the story of Lester Flatt's baptism, Skaggs' friend Shawn Lane has composed a tune reminiscent of the old shape-note Gospel songs so familiar to rural Southern people. "God's been with me through troubled times / With hands not seen, He's guided my way": words that could have come from Lester Flatt or from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. "But my foolish pride and worldly things / Kept me from Him until today."

It's that foolish pride and those worldly things that destroy real families, a real way of life like that of the old subsistence farmers that Andrew Lytle speaks of in "The Hind 'Tit," and the real music that extols kinfolk and roots and lightens the load of life's hardships. But Ricky Skaggs is calling us back—back to that real life and back to the Faith. Those who are blessed to hear this record can sing along with him and Lester Flatt: "Why did I wait so long to answer the call / From the Greatest of All?" After all, faith comes by hearing.

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