

# arts/entertainment

## Houseman's company shows repertory at its best

By Christian S. Thompson

Under the artistic direction of John Houseman, The Acting Company performed three plays at Kimball Recital Hall in Lincoln and at the Orpheum Theatre in Omaha, showing audiences what repertory performing is all about.

### theater review

At a press conference in Omaha, John Houseman, popularly known for his role as Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*, told reporters that The Acting Company fulfills a "unique and extraordinary function in American theater." The Acting Company is the official touring arm of the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and is the only company in the country solely dedicated to the development of American actors through repertory touring and performing.

The Acting Company opened its Omaha/Lincoln stop with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although completely traditional in terms of diction and costuming, the set design gave the production a fresh, contemporary adaptation.

The set, designed by Heidi Landesman, was geometrically-shaped aluminum tubing that resembled an elaborate jungle-gym. The set itself was abstract enough that all of



Photo by Peter Cunningham  
courtesy of Kimball Recital Hall

Hermia (Lynn Chausow) and Helena (Pam Nyberg) are shown in a scene from The Acting Company's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

the scenes worked well in it; consequently, there was no need for set changes. It was an integral part of the play and the players without being an obtrusive presence.

The nymphs and fairies of the farce performed acrobatics, making exceptional use of the set design. Lighting was especially nice, as was costume design by Carol Oditz. Not only were the costumes stitch-perfect, but they were color-coordinated so that no matter what grouping of actors were on stage, they were chromatically balanced and aesthetically appealing.

#### Eccentric actors

Certainly the best part of the production was the acting, which reflected Houseman's statement that "the actors were not picked for their acting aptitude or consistency, rather for their eccentricity." Nick Bottom and Pyramus, played by Richard S. Iglewski, was obnoxiously hammy, but fittingly so for the characters. Michele-Denise Woods did a marvelous job as Titania, femme-fatale of the fairy queens, and Patrick O'Connell wielded an excellent rendition of Oberon, the fairy king. His almost hypnotic, resonant voice and agile movements made for a dominating presence on stage.

Casey Biggs played Lysander, the frustrated lover of Hermia, and turned what otherwise might have been a lackluster role into a beautifully understated character impassioned with quiet intensity. Biggs captured subtle nuances generally overlooked in most renditions of the play.

The Acting Company's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was practically flawless. The comic timing and pacing was perfect. The group exemplified deep rapport not only with the audience, but with each other as well. The intimacy they have for one another on stage is a rare quality they bring in all their performances.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was followed on Saturday evening by *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett. Again, set design by Radu Boruzescu and lighting by Dennis Parichy was exceptional. A giant stonelike incline dominated the stage, adorned with a single boulder and single-branched barren tree.

The backdrop was effectively shaded to subtly recreate the sky and the total starkness of the design accentuated the tone and theme of the play itself.

#### Godot possibly God

Throughout the course of the play, Estragon and Vladimir "wait for Godot," who never shows up. Although interpretations vary, critics have commonly asserted that Godot represents God. Estragon and Vladimir meet Lucky and Pozzo, who are passing through. Ironically, Lucky is not "lucky." Rather he seems to symbolize all man's inhumanity to man. Played by Paul Walker, he does an exemplary job of externalizing those sentiments. Wearing a leash and a running sore from rope burns, he pants and froths at the mouth through most of his performance, looking more like a rabid dog than a human being. *Waiting for Godot* is a disturbing play, and the character development was thorough.

The Acting Company's tour of Omaha and Lincoln closed Sunday night with Carlo Goldoni's *Il Campiello*, a

*Venetian Comedy*. Dominated by general pandemonium, *A Venetian Comedy* is a slice of life in Venice in the 1700s. Wives gossip, girls blush, lovers quarrel and the people of Venice strut out their comic lives upon the stage of the village commons. The costumes and set exuded the grimy, gritty, moody, sooty, dirty feel of 18th century Venice. The characterization and interplay was consistently exceptional. The comic behavior of the lusty Italians was uproariously funny.

This is the Acting Company's fourth appearance in Lincoln. It was founded in 1972 when John Houseman, then director of the Theater Center at the Julliard School in New York, saw in his first graduating class a group of actors so talented that he felt they should not be disbanded.

Houseman and Margot Harley, executive producer, formed those actors into a professional company, which made its debut as the dramatic arm of the nation's leading summer festival, The Saratoga Performing Arts Festival in New York State. The company became known as the City Center Acting Company, under the auspices of New York City's Center of Music and Drama.

In 1975, the Company became known to the public simply as The Acting Company. Its exceptional performance here in Lincoln attests to its prominence as the leading repertory group in America.



Photo courtesy of Kimball Recital Hall

Estragon (Richard S. Iglewski), Pozzo (Barry Heins) and Vladimir (Jeffrey Rubin) try to recall the topic of conversation in a scene from The Acting Company's production of *Waiting for Godot*.

## 'Prophecy' tells of the crystal ball in our games

By David Wood

Science continues to put us in our place. Almost 30 years after Crick and Watson revealed the genetic code in a book that shaped modern thinking about the origins of life more than any book since Darwin's, Zsolt Harsanyi and Richard Hutton have written a sequel. *Genetic Prophecy: Beyond the Double Helix* is an account of the impact and implication to medical technology of the discovery of the key to life's blueprint.

### book review

Evolutionary logic demands we are created unequal. We are endowed genetically with varying biological capabilities in order to adapt to changing surroundings. Nature and nurture are not distinct tyrants vying for the determination of our character. Rather, recent evidence shows, in most every instance they are an intimate duo bent on mutual survival.

Genes bracket us into probable ranges of response to environmental factors. If their sequences could be read directly off chromosomes, our future health and general behavior largely could be foretold, also given the full knowledge of our environment.

Prognostic medicine has developed a shortcut for this formidable task. It can determine the blueprint from the structure. In each of us exists "genetic markers," various protein-like compounds in our organs or blood that directly indicate the presence or absence of individual genes.

From a pricked finger, the scientist can adjust the spread of our individual chances at later developing certain cancers or other disorders. *Genetic Prophecy* is the story, written for layfolk, of the past, present and future of the new medical skill called "genetic screening." The book is a historical summary of seemingly piecemeal discoveries, a directory of known correlations and an itinerary of implications, both medical and ethical.

Richard Hutton is a magazine science-writer who has five books under his belt. Dr. Zsolt Harsanyi, a professor of genetics at Cornell's medical school, currently oversees the committee advising congress on matters of genetic research. Hutton and Harsanyi have written a book that is both thorough and 276 pages long, excluding appendices. It is specific and yet not overly technical.

The subtitle, *Beyond the Double Helix*, remains problematic. Harsanyi and Hutton seem to feel they're onto the hottest discovery since Crick and Watson, when obviously genetic screening is significant on a much less fundamental level. But, as they never wax into bombast or science fiction, their air of self-importance is easily forgiven. They understate as often as overstate.

Besides, on another level, the level of direct impact on society, the craft of screening is more threatening than the ability to decode DNA. Genetic prophecy, as a sweeping tool of discrimination, has vast potential for abuse.

If our probability of health can be tested, and if the records were public, we can expect to see racially based price discrimination being written into insurance premiums. Also, we can expect to see job discrimination. An employer who wishes to avoid claims also will avoid workers with known susceptibilities to their environment.

We already have witnessed the prejudicial clamor that can spring from a genetic marker. After nurse-murderer Richard Speck went to court, all tall males with an extra Y chromosome were labeled violent criminal types, despite evidence that made no such claim. The most it shows is that XYY persons, if they commit a crime, are slightly more likely to be caught.

Likewise, 30 states in 1972 erroneously decided that sickle-cell anemia was a communicable disease and sought legislation to isolate blacks by mandatory screening. In truth, sickle-cell anemia is not endemic to blacks, and neither is it a disease. It is a cellular deviance that leads to problems only under stresses that are known and can be avoided for a longer life.

The ramifications of screening are as startling as its breadth of knowledge. *Genetic Prophecy* is an eye-opening book, and you don't even need to be a science major to be amazed.