

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Wednesday, September 21, 1994

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Play depicts 'wickedness' of blizzard

By Paula Lavigne
Senior Reporter

"Horizontal snow that was hard and dry as salt dashed and seethed over everything, sloped up like rooftops, tricked its way across creek bed and ditches, milkily purred down city streets, stole shanties and coops and pens from a bleak landscape that was even then called the Great American Desert." — Ron Hansen, "Wickedness," from the anthology "Nebraska"

On Jan. 12, 1888, Nebraska took a fatal blow.

What began as an abnormally warm day turned into the most devastating blizzard the Midwest has ever seen. Thousands of cattle lay frozen across the prairie. Horses fell over in their tracks.

More than 100 Nebraskans lost their lives in the unforgiving cold and wind.

The next day, a gossamer sheet of sparkling snow blanketed the fields and crystallized everything it touched.

This paradox of ferocity and beauty is the essence of the world premiere of "Wickedness," a dance/theater interpretation of the 1888 blizzard.

"Wickedness" combines the talents of choreographer Janet Lily, composer Andy Kirschner, novelist Ron Hansen (a Nebraska native) and several local artists.

The event is part of the "Great Plains in Performance Festival," sponsored by the Wagon Train Project and its director, Amy Lamphere.

Performances will be held Friday and Saturday in the State Capitol building.

"At 6 a. m., the temperature at Valentine, Nebraska, was 30 degrees above zero. Half a day later the temperature was 14 below, a drop of 44 degrees and the difference between having toes and not, between staying alive overnight and not, between ordinary concerns and one overriding idea." — "Wickedness"

The author

Ron Hansen knows the full force of the capricious Nebraska weather.

In January 1975, Hansen was en route from near Fremont to Omaha when his Volkswagen drifted off the road. He was stuck in a blizzard.

"It was a whiteout. I was way off the highway, driving off the side of the road, and it looked like the whole world was removed from me," he said.

Hansen said he knew he was on the wrong side of the road when a semitrailer truck passed him on his right side.

"That's OK when you're in England, but not in Nebraska," he said, laughing.

Hansen never forgot that experience. He paid close attention to the coverage of the blizzard in the Omaha World-Herald.

In its coverage, the newspaper mentioned the blizzard of 1888 and the book, "In All Its Fury," by W.H. O'Gara. It is a collection of actual stories from people caught in the 1888 blizzard.

The young author was so fascinated by the stories that he took them and weaved them into fiction. Some of the stories are elaborate recreations; others stay true to context.

Hansen said his enchantment stemmed from the paradox that a blizzard created. It calls upon destruction and death, yet it transforms the landscape into something of a tragic beauty.

"I think I was fascinated by it because there's a sort of malevolence that comes with weather," he said. "When you look at weather, it's neutral. Then you associate something evil with it."

Weather makes people realize how small they are, he said.

"It's like swimming in an ocean and realizing a wave can do anything to you."

Hansen said a blizzard meant much more to people in 1888 than it did today.

"You saw what pain and misery they had to undergo. They had so many miles to go to find a farmhouse," he said. "Some people who got lost and died in the blizzard would turn up three or four weeks later."

Hansen, who is on staff at the University of California-Santa Cruz, said he usually came home at Christmas time to "get a taste of the Nebraska winters."



Jeff Haller/DN

Cat Steinweis, left, and Gail Ogden practice part of the dancing for "Wickedness" at a rehearsal on Monday evening at the St. Francis Chapel in Lincoln. The dance/theater interpretation of the blizzard of 1888 will be performed Friday and Saturday at the Nebraska State Capitol.

Quik Facts

Show: "Wickedness"

At: State Capitol

Times: noon and 4 p.m.
Friday, noon and 3 p.m.
Saturday

Tickets: n/a, all performances are free

The choreographer

Janet Lily is happy to be back in the Midwest.

"I love to watch the sunrise in the morning," Lily said. "I love the landscape. I love the way the air feels. I like the extremes."

She misses snow.

Lily, who is in the process of moving to Santa Cruz, Calif., said people in California talked about how perfect the weather was there.

"They talk about it as if they created it," she said. "It's their

egos."

People in the Midwest, however, take pride in weathering the extremes, she said.

Lily is back in the Midwest to choreograph "Wickedness," a story focused on an extreme — a blizzard.

"I'm moving to California, and I'm back here doing a piece about snow," she said, laughing.

When Lily used to live in Ann Arbor, Mich., she said the snow prevented her from doing many everyday things and started to make winter a miserable experience.

"My mission is to make winter fun again," she said.

"Wickedness" is doing that.

Lily, an avid reader of new fiction, came upon Hansen's anthology "Nebraska."

"The impressive thing is that his writing captures the vivacity and grit of the Midwest," she said.

She said the story lent itself to a dance/theater adaptation.

"The strength of its images is

powerful," she said. "It has the visceral element of cold and wind."

Lily said she planned on portraying the images in different fashions. She will present some of them as straight storytelling and others in more symbolic, abstract styles.

Her interpretations will incorporate theatrical gestures, singing, spoken words and different styles of dance set to specially composed music.

"(Choreographing) is a really fun process. It's problem-solving," she said. "You know why the story is appealing. The problem-solving lies in how to communicate that feeling."

The composer

Andy Kirschner is caught in a blizzard of notes — literally.

Kirschner, also a resident of Ann Arbor, Mich., has been working on an original score for "Wickedness" since Lily asked him to join the project.

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Laid-back restaurant offers good food, casual look



Damon Lee/DN

Customers dine at Grotto's on a recent weekend evening. The restaurant at 11th and O streets, features a menu geared toward an everyday dining experience, according to owner Nader Sepapur.

By Joel Strauch
Senior Reporter

Lincoln's Rotisserie has had a makeover, and where it once sat now stands Grotto's.

Nader Sepapur, the owner of Grotto's, said, "I wanted to break away from the upscale mode while keeping the quality of the food the same."

Grotto's was the name of the cafe and bar that was in the basement of the Rotisserie. It held more of a casual atmosphere than the restaurant upstairs.

"It had nice music, no tablecloths and a choice of a lighter menu," he said.

"I geared it down upstairs; people can get anything from a burger to a steak. It doesn't have to be a big dining affair."

The menu is more laid-back than it used to be.

"I made the menu geared more toward everyday dining experience," he said. "I lowered the prices and added salad, sandwiches and pizza to it."

"The major theme of the menu now is the grilled brochettes. They come with either

Quik Facts

Restaurant: Grotto's

At: 11th and O streets

Hours: Monday through Saturday,
11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and 4:30 to
10:00 p.m.

Trademark: Grilled brochettes

Comment: Delicious and diverse array of dishes at affordable prices

salad, pasta, rice or fries."

The chicken breast grilled brochette was exquisite, served with alfredo pasta primavera and a mild mixed vegetable dish on the side. Washed down with an Anchor Steam beer, the meal was delightful and affordable.

Grotto's also offers a variety of novel appetizers.

"They are all original recipes, but they

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