

Ensemble Theatre Company

The Thanksgiving Play

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

CELEBRATING THE ART OF STORYTELLING with one of the most brilliant new plays of the last ten years, Ensemble Theatre Company opened its 45th Santa Barbara season last Saturday at the New Vic with playwright Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play*. It's a drop dead funny (tasteless pun intended), mercilessly eviscerating examination of white America's "attempt to reconcile the weight of historical inaccuracies with the desire for inclusion and sensitivity," award-winning director Brian McDonald remarks in a program note.

Highlighting with slashing stilettos of mirth, the tragi-comic absurdity in recent years of well-intentioned but naïve attempts by white Americans to make up for what playwright FastHorse (Sicangu Lakota Nation) calls "the longest black comedy in the world," her funny as an acid bath 2015 masterpiece, which received its Broadway debut in 2023 doesn't need to mention the near total extermination by the U.S. government of Native Americans over the past couple hundred years to make its point; silly platitudes and twisted word salads do not adequately compensate for countless trails of tears, and Wounded Knees. FastHorse, a 2020-2025 MacArthur Fellow, makes it punishingly clear that indigenous peoples understand cycles – there's nothing new in the white man's talk, it just goes round and round.

Four superlative professionals, all masterfully intuitive in understanding the substance or lack thereof of their characters, were also acutely attuned to each other on stage at last Saturday's opening of *The Thanksgiving Play*. The split-second timing required for successful comedic interaction between the four sparkled with energy. FastHorse's 90-minute dark comedy danced with wry spirit and agile consequence. Numberless nuanced subtexts and gossamer allusions to Native American terrors past, present, and future sped by, greased with several slick heights of laughter-wracked schtick and timing. Director McDonald did not miss a single opportunity for swift verbal punch or subtextual superlatives. This cast was surely a dream come true of ensemble creativity and interaction.

The four characters are all white, one of several FastHorse cannonades about who tells history's tale - the victors. Los Angeles-based Devin Sidell played the earnest, if for all the wrong reasons Logan, director in charge of creating a new, politically correct version of the traditional and traditionally wrong First Thanksgiving story. Sidell's hyperventilated unctuous cloying, her supplications to colleagues about collaboration and community, her rituals of desperate "method," and her borderline hysterical, usually simultaneous episodes of inspirational hypertension and exhausted fetal retreat made for priceless dollops of comedic opportunity and character caricature. Sidell was on top of every swift-moving gaff and verbal pitfall at last Saturday's opening – her character fragile intellectually, and shallow in leadership skills.

Aging surfer and occasional theatrical hire, the "cool" character of Jaxton was given perfect Hollywood casting couch insouciance by Los Angeles-based Adam Hagenbuch, no stranger to the endless audition game himself. Jaxton becomes, in Hagenbuch's crafting of the character, the most rational member of this somewhat squirrely foursome. Jaxton is at least certain of his own certainty, while the others grasp at intellectual and emotional straws. It's a wonderfully subtle, warmly comedic, and vibrantly human character study by Hagenbuch, in his Ensemble Theatre Company debut.

The role of schoolteacher and wannabe playwright Caden is juicy, and Southern California-based Will Block escalates his character's increasingly manic behavior by slow degrees, on a spit of comedic edginess. Quite perfectly over the top from time to time, no easy task, Caden's character is in a way the most genuine manifestation of emotional truth of the four principals. Walking a tightrope between antipodes of excessive flourish and solid history, Block gave Caden an aura of real if fractious humanity.

Los Angeles-based, but more importantly, daughter of the Jersey shore Ashley Platz, turned the dangerous role of sexy but dumb Alicia into a triumph of understated comedic chutzpah. The slightest flaw in empathic understanding of her character, the briefest failure at cha-ching gotcha statement and response synchronicity, a faltering in any way of Alicia's disarming charms and hilarious mind to mouth faux pas could easily have plunged the character into the dross of stereotype. Platz' understated exultation of Alicia was, put simply, brilliant.

A single but somehow engrossing set piece by scenic and lighting designer Mike Billings - an elementary school classroom where the four hapless colleagues gather to improvise their way toward collective Thanksgiving consciousness - worked like a charm; chairs and a settee



Photos by Zach Mendez

Devin Sidell, Will Block, Adam Hagenbuch and Ashley Platz

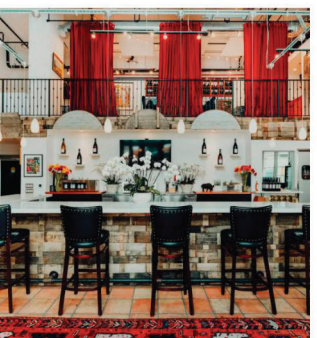
being the means by which scene variety could be actualized visually. Costume designer Abra Flores dressed her four charges in contemporary SoCal rehearsal garb, adding a little snigger perhaps with the character Logan's ensemble of implied if nerdy authority. Separating scene breaks with devilish funny videos of kids in Pilgrim couture singing blasphemous, ill-fitting Turkey Day lyrics to Christmas favorites was the clever work of Randall Robert Tico, his 17th original music and sound design project for Ensemble Theatre.

Above all, director Brian McDonald deserves kudos with laurels for a tight, brilliantly staged, diction-perfect – I understood every word – clockwork of precisely timed comedic virtuosity. His spectacular ensemble cast presented a masterpiece in masterful manner. There's more though, and it's what makes FastHorse one of America's most important playwrights. The number and urgency of issues addressed with wit and forgiving irony in *The Thanksgiving Play* nevertheless culminate in a fascinating, Godot-like enigma at the very end of the play. Maybe the journey isn't about becoming anything, but rather about un-becoming everything so human beings can be what they were meant to be in the first place.


Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews or Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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