

FRONT & CENTER

■ PORTLAND, ORE.

Moon Shadows



Russell Edge, left, and Christopher Foster Shaw in *Apollo* at Portland Center Stage.

COTTON FUELED THE ROCKET SHIPS

of Jules Verne's seminal science fiction novel *From the Earth to the Moon*, published the year the U.S. Civil War ended. Why not—cotton had certainly propelled the economy of the young American nation. And though the combustible forces that made space travel a reality for the U.S. a century later were not literally cotton-based, that milestone was achieved, just like the success of the cotton industry, at a heavy price to the nation's integrity. Los Angeles playwright/director Nancy Keystone has found the intersections between these seemingly unrelated layers of U.S. history in her collage-like, three-part *Apollo*, which debuts as a whole Jan. 13–Feb. 8 at **Portland Center Stage** as part of a citywide Fertile Ground Festival. (Parts 1 and 2 were previously seen at L.A.'s **Center Theatre Group**.)

The play hinges on the revelation that German rocket scientists—the spoils of World War II—were brought to the United States and employed on missile systems that eventually became the foundation of the space program. Keystone learned about this covert program from a biography of Arthur Rudolph, who had overseen production of V-2 rockets in a Nazi factory staffed with concentration camp prisoners, 20,000 of whom died toiling on the technology. Rudolph and other highly trained Germans—their war crimes overlooked—eventually relocated to Huntsville, Ala., where they dreamed of reaching space, with Verne's book as inspiration.

In the same place at the same time, Gov. George Wallace was infamously trying to block black students from the University of Alabama. In Keystone's view, the Civil Rights era, during which the U.S. struggled with its legacy of African-American slavery, is a sharp counterpoint to the country's simultaneous enthusiasm for a space program that also benefited from forced labor. Keystone points out, "We've been doing this for 400 years with African Americans, Native Americans and others: America has embraced progress on the backs of people it oppressed." *Apollo* juxtaposes America's aspirations against its continually compromised ideals, all the way up to modern attempts at eradicating terrorism. "In the interest of national security," Keystone echoes. "It's the same story. The same words. Every time." —Brett Oppegaard

ERREN DELGADILLO JR.



The title of Athol Fugard's new play *Coming Home* has many meanings.

To begin with, its premiere at **Long Wharf Theatre** in January marks a return of the South African playwright to his American artistic home in New Haven. Long Wharf is where *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* bowed in the '70s, and it was across town at **Yale Repertory Theatre** that *The Road to Mecca*, "*Master Harold*"...and the boys and *A Place with the Pigs* all had their first productions in the '80s.

■ PHILADELPHIA

STILL STANLEY

If you've ever had the sudden urge to scream "STELLA!" on stage, you can thank the **Walnut Street Theatre**. In 1947, young Tennessee Williams premiered his new play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, at the theatre—then a Broadway try-out house for the Shuberts. In celebration of the theatre's 200th anniversary, the bellows of Stanley Kowalski will echo through the halls again Jan. 13–March 1. However, instead of acting as a pre-Broadway try-out, this production showcases Philadelphia's growing local talent, including Walnut regulars Jeffrey Coon as the apish Stanley and director Malcom Black. And even though the times have changed, Bernard Harvard, president and producing artistic director of the theatre, believes the play still "packs a tremendous amount of punch" and will shock and excite modern audiences. "There's a level of brutality in that play which I find shocking, as I'm sure it was shocking in 1947," Harvard says. "That's a mark of a classic piece—that it stands up after all these years." —*Suzy Evans*

■ NEW HAVEN, CONN.

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

"I'm returning to my old stomping ground," says Fugard, speaking by phone from his home in San Diego. "I can't tell you how thrilled I am to be waving my flag there once again before we end."

Fugard, 76, is also returning to the characters of *Valley Song*, a play he premiered in 1995 in Johannesburg shortly after apartheid ended in his country. That play concluded with its leading character leaving her remote village for the city in search of a better life in the new South Africa. *Coming Home* finds her returning under different circumstances.

"There was a wonderful optimism at the time of *Valley Song* about the future of South Africa," says Fugard. "But the situation at the moment is far, far, far from rosy. I wanted to update my vision of South Africa. There is a harsh reality in the play, but I also hold out the possibility of hope."

In an effort to understand Fugard's world more intimately, Long Wharf artistic director Gordon Edelstein, who will be staging the play, and the production's set designer, Eugene Lee, traveled in September to New Bethesda, South Africa, the setting of the five-actor play. "I know the trip will inform what I do in all kinds of conscious and unconscious ways," Edelstein acknowledges.

When they joined Fugard for a visit to the hamlet where the play is based, Lee says he was "struck by the sense of space, by a country that seemed to be lost in time, by the incredible light of its unpolluted skies."

Fugard says his relationship with America has allowed him, too, a special artistic perspective. "Sometimes you can be too close to your subject," the playwright notes. "It's like a painter who steps back from his canvas. That is what America has afforded me." —*Frank Rizzo*

■ LA JOLLA, CALIF., AND NEW YORK CITY

Leading Ladies Trade Places



J.E. MASHILLIAN

Rebecca Lawrence and Charles Busch in *The Third Story* at La Jolla Playhouse.

LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE IS A LONG way from the Limbo Lounge, the East Village bar where playwright/performer Charles Busch cut his stiletto heels in such 1980s-era drag romps as *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* and *Psycho Beach Party*. But La Jolla is where Busch spent this past fall previewing his new fairy tale/film noir mash-up *The Third Story*, in which he played both a gangland czarina and the Russian witch Baba Yaga. He'll reprise both roles in the show's Off-Broadway run in January for **MCC Theater**.

"I had never worked at a regional theatre before," says Busch. "I found the subscriber audiences at La Jolla a bit of a challenge. I used to think sometimes when I would come onstage that they were saying to each other, 'Now, is she the one who was married to Fernando Lamas?'"

Busch felt the call of the 'burbs for a practical playwright's reason: He wanted an out-of-town tryout. "Last year, I did *Our Leading Lady* at Manhattan Theatre Club," Busch recalled, "and after seeing the full production, I started figuring out all the things I should have done."

Since its La Jolla debut, *The Third Story* has had significant rewrites—and an even more significant bit of recasting: Kathleen Turner has stepped into the role of a '40s-era Hollywood screenwriter. Busch anticipates the waggish commentary this outsized pairing might provoke.

"She's this flamboyant lady, and I'm a man in drag playing a woman—and what is the difference? It's true—she could play my parts, and I could play hers."

Indeed, though not all of his plays are so gender-elastic—he's resisted requests to cast male actors as the women in his more naturalistic boulevard comedy *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*. But Busch doesn't mind if women try on the roles in one of his larger-than-life shows.

"You might lose a little something in the translation, but there are actresses out there who have a gift for film parody—who understand those old movie actresses and can evoke them," Busch says. "I don't mind, as long as they pay the royalties." —*Rob Weinert-Kendt*

JANUARY ALMANAC

65 YEARS AGO (1924)

Sydney S. Cohen and Morris Sussman re-open Harlem's Apollo Theatre after the death of former owner Bill Minsky and welcome African-American patrons for the first time. Originally, the theatre functioned as a whites-only burlesque club, but it will go on to become an iconic location for African-American entertainment.

45 YEARS AGO (1964)

The inaugural season of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center, under the direction of Elia Kazan and Robert Whitehead, begins with Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*. The show will run until May 1965.

35 YEARS AGO (1974)

Michael Bennet, Michon Peacock and Tony Stevens meet with 18 chorus dancers at the Nicklaus Exercise Center on East 23rd Street to talk about the grim outlook on Broadway and their unwavering passions for dance. Bennet leads the discussion, and these dancers' stories become the basis for the musical *A Chorus Line*.

20 YEARS AGO (1989)

The Walker Art Center of Minneapolis, in collaboration with Southern Theater, starts its Out There series of experimental, new and under-the-radar work. The fusion of theatre, movement, music and multimedia over four weekends goes on to become an annual fixture of the Walker's performing arts season.

■ NEW YORK CITY



AMIEE LEVINE

Joy Kello in *Yanagai! Yanagai!*

"SOME STORIES ARE TOLD SO THAT they may be remembered; others are told so that they may never happen again." That's how playwright Andrea James puts it in the stage directions of her *Yanagai! Yanagai!*, a mythical tale that weaves together Australian Aboriginal yarns of past and present.

■ SAN FRANCISCO

THE BLOGGER NEXT DOOR

Here's how Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, whose new play *T.I.C.: Trenchcoat in Common* explores the weird world of blogging, assesses the effect of the Internet on his work: "There's awareness of how entertainment gets constructed. People are much more impatient, so the pace at which things move affects how I write for the stage."

The San Francisco-based playwright's brand of dark absurdism has run the gamut from plays about science and casual sex (*boom*) to epic explorations of evolutionary impulses and animal instinct (*Hunter Gatherers*, which nabbed a 2007 ACTA Steinberg New Play Award). No matter how grand their statements, his plays are always grounded in an inimitable sense of humor. He describes

his latest endeavor, directed by Ken Prestininzi and commissioned by San Francisco's **Encore Theatre Company** (where it runs Jan. 2–Feb. 1 with support from Theatre Bay Area's New Works Fund), as his "teen angst/privacy/voyeurism/exhibitionism play." The piece centers on a precocious teenage girl who blogs about the goings-on in her apartment building—an idea that germinated from Nachtrieb's own web journal. "For some reason, it's so much easier to share really personal matters online. With Ken's help, I began to think about how you take something like a blog, which is all exposition, and physicalize it for the theatre."

In fact, the non-neighborly attitudes most of us have come to associate with urban and suburban life are connected to the Internet tug-of-war between intimacy and alienation. Explains Lisa Steindler, Encore's artistic director, "The play is an exploration of a rapidly developing form of residential living, 'tenancies in common,' where people enter into complex legal and living relationships with other people unknown to them. Communal living under the same roof, while striving to maintain some sense of privacy, is very challenging."

While the material couldn't be more timely, *T.I.C.* is hardly a simple trend piece impelled by the pulse of pop culture. "I'd say it's inspired more by *Rear Window* than 'Gossip Girl,'" Nachtrieb quips. —*Nirmala Nataraj*



CLAYTON LOBB

Liam Vincent and Arwen Anderson in *T.I.C.: Trenchcoat in Common*.

From the Outback to the Sea

The play's title translates as an emphatic "go away"—but its underlying meaning is closer to the notion that before you enter an area, you must first seek permission under the appropriate cultural protocols. The Yorta Yorta people, who predate the Druids and Egyptians, have dealt with unwanted visitors for a long time and continue to struggle for recognition. A 1998 court hearing denied the Yorta Yorta ancestral land claims.

Yanagai! Yanagai!, running at **La MaMa ETC** Jan. 8–25 in association with **Australian Aboriginal Theatre Initiative**, is a satellite event for Australia Week's G'Day USA. Music, puppetry, mime and magic tell two connected stories. One is about Munurra, a Yorta Yorta woman who has been cast out by an ancestral spirit. As Munurra walks to the ocean, she sheds tears of homesickness that

flow together to create a river. Two comical dingoes accompany her as she encounters Curr (based on Sir Edward Curr, the first colonist to travel into Yorta Yorta country in 1841, whose testimony is later used to negate the oral history of the Yorta Yorta in the 1998 court case). The playwright emphasizes how much importance the Yorta Yorta people place on spoken histories—one character declares that the land is his university: "This is where we got our degrees from," he says, gesturing to the territory around him.

Costume designer Ramona Ponce draws parallels between the play's theme and American history, citing "displacement of native people, devaluation and destruction of native cultures, the search for redemption, peace with one's past and the urgent quest to learn from one's elders." —*Eliza Bent*