

FRIDAY, JANUARY 11, 2008



CARL SKUTSCH

Rebecca Wisocky's Frau evokes Leni Riefenstahl.

The Will (If Not Triumph) Of the Frau

The life of Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker who made movies for Hitler, has been examined and critiqued aplenty, but rarely so entertainingly as in "Amazons

THEATER REVIEW

NEIL
GENZLINGER

and Their Men," a brash play by Jordan Harrison receiving a lively production by Clubbed Thumb at the Ohio Theater.

Mr. Harrison doesn't name Riefenstahl outright — the character, riotously played by Rebecca Wisocky, is called simply the Frau — but he turns fragments from her life into a story that is funny and thought provoking and even a little touching, not to mention an efficient 75 minutes.

The Frau is obsessed with turning the myth of Achilles' bat-

tle with the Amazons into a film (a project Riefenstahl attempted unsuccessfully) and has cast herself as Penthesilea, leader of the female warriors. The play alternates between the film set, where the Frau's take on her role suggests Joan Crawford at her worst, and real life.

A lot is going on in that real life. The movie's Achilles (Brian Sgambati) is falling for the young man (Gio Perez) who keeps bringing the Frau telegrams from her friends in the Fascist government, on the verge of starting a war. And the Frau's sister (Heidi Schreck), a recurring extra in her films whose specialty is dying on camera, is trying to get her to wake up to the ominous goings-on in the world.

Mr. Harrison's inventive creation is given a turbocharged treatment, often cartoonish but occasionally sobering, by the director, Ken Rus Schmoll. The four actors have mastered the difficult comic timing demanded by the script, and if these characters don't ever quite achieve true depth, Mr. Harrison has obviously done some homework, pinning his absurdist antics to a framework of fact.

"Amazons and Their Men" continues through Jan. 26 at the Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 352-3101.

Amazons and Their Men

Clubbed Thumb presents a *Amazons and Their Men*, Jordan Harrison's play inspired by the life and work of controversial German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. The following description is from the show's press release: "In *Amazons and Their Men*, the Frau used to make beautiful films for a fascist government. Now she's trying to direct a film that's simply beautiful. The Frau casts herself in the lead role of the Amazon queen Penthesilea, who falls for Achilles on the battlefield of the Trojan War. But when her actors start disappearing, it becomes difficult for the Frau to ignore the real war outside her sound stage." This play had a developmental run in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival last year.

Pictured: A scene from Amazons and Their Men (photo © Clubbed Thumb)

nytheatre.com review

Robin Rothstein · January 5, 2008

It is rare to see a play where all aspects of the production synchronize perfectly. Theatre is such a collaborative, human effort it is almost always inevitable that something will fall short. However, the only aspect that falls short in the thought-provoking and highly entertaining, *Amazons and Their Men* by Jordan Harrison is the breezy 70-minute running-time, leaving you wanting more of what this innovative playwright has to offer.

Amazons and Their Men is, among other things, a quirky examination of

VENUE

Ohio Theatre

OPENED

January 5, 2008

CLOSES

January 26, 2008

PERFORMANCES

Mon - Tue, Thu - Sun
at 8pm

RUNNING TIME

1 hour, 10 minutes
No intermission

TICKETS

\$25
212-352-3101
[Order tickets online](#)

SPECIAL TICKET

PRICES
Students: \$20

CAST

Rebecca Wisocky,
Brian Sgamati, Heidi
Schreck, Gio Perez

AUTHOR

Jordan Harrison

DIRECTOR

Ken Rus Schmoll

SETS

Sue Rees

LIGHTING

Garin Marschall

COSTUMES

Kirche Leigh Zeile

SOUND

Leah Gelpe

MUSIC

Matt Carlson

STAGE MANAGER

Jeff Meyers

PROJECTIONS

the challenges of artistic integrity and living truthfully in the face of persecution. Inspired by the life and work of controversial German actress and Third Reich-friendly film director Leni Riefenstahl, the play imagines, in a heightened way, the inner life of a woman who is haunted by the kinds of conflicts and contradictions that Riefenstahl may have lived. Mostly set in early-1930's Germany, a time when individual identity was well on its way to being quashed, *Amazons and Their Men* centers on a diva of the German screen called The Frau who has defiantly rejected the Minister of Culture's pushy offers of funding for continuing to make films of government rallies. The Frau wants to create films on her own terms now, no matter how little money she has to make them. She wants to only make beautiful films about beautiful people, films in which she is always the star and always the most beautiful of all.

Before being introduced to The Frau, we first meet a young woman identified as The Extra, who tells us that what we are about to see is footage from an old movie that ended up on the cutting room floor, and that it is within these discarded scraps where truth begins and where everyone has a story, even The Extras of the world. Enter The Frau in the midst of directing and starring in a big B-like film (performed in hilarious over-the-top fashion by the small, talented ensemble) where she plays Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, opposite an amorous Achilles.

The role of Achilles is played by a character called The Man, a handsome, muscular Jew from the ghetto, who The Frau has discovered and hired to be in the film. She sees The Man as beautiful, but with imperfections, and so is confident he won't steal focus from her. The Frau, played with no-holds-barred grandiosity by Rebecca Wisocky, is a complicated woman. Part Miranda Priestly, part Oscar Schindler, she bites the heads off her actors one minute, while protecting them the next. The Frau's desire to be viewed as beautiful mixes with her pathological jealous side, creating a concoction that ultimately turns her into the Führer of her celluloid fantasy world.

The cast of *Amazons and Their Men* is an ideal quartet. Wisocky is as funny as she is fierce, and knows exactly how and when to deliver a line or look with punch, often evoking big guffaws. Brian Sgambati plays The Man with a likable blend of virility and sensitivity. Gio Perez as The Boy, a destitute, sweet-faced messenger of Romanian descent who is also hired for the film, is a tender foil for the imperious Frau, and Heidi Schreck plays the victimized role of The Extra with a nice balance of compassion, comedy and inner strength.

Harrison has created a unique world of devastating beauty and humor here in a highly theatrical, accessible play. His non-traditional structure is tight as a drum and his use of narration throughout works well in bringing out deeper meaning, as opposed to being expository. His dialogue is focused and the poetry and economy of his language work in tandem to make observations that momentarily linger as they move from head

to heart. At one point The Extra explains to The Man why The Frau uses her over and over to die in her films. "I have a talent for dying inconspicuously," she says. The Man pauses briefly, then replies, "That isn't a talent I aspire to," a devastating reminder that for a man like him, real death in the real world is biting at his heels.

Amazons and Their Men is directed with tremendous care and intelligence by Ken Rus Schmoll, who completely gets Harrison's writing and squeezes out every possible nuance from the play and the actors. His staging is also imaginative, making powerful use of the playing area's depth and scattered pillars. Sue Rees's clever rolling platform and projections, Garin Marschall's delicate lighting, and Leah Gelpe's subtle sound design all work together to enhance the play even more, and Kirche Leigh Zeile's sensible, specific costumes help to add layers for the actors of the inner kind, as well as the outer. Kudos must also be given to the Clubbed Thumb producing team, who have put together and overseen a cadre of talented artists, resulting in an experience that doesn't seem as if it could be improved upon anywhere else. The run of *Amazons and Their Men* is short, so be sure to fly like Hermes down to the Ohio Theater in Soho to see this beautiful work before it permanently fades to black.

RIEFENSTAHL MY CHILDREN

'Amazons' as Nazi soap opera

By Leonard Jacobs



It's hard to blame playwright Jordan Harrison for wanting to wrap his brain around Leni Riefenstahl with his play, *Amazons and Their Men*. More than four years after her death at age 101, the endlessly controversial German filmmaker remains a moral conundrum, a historical figure more slippery than a sasquatch.

Riefenstahl was a dancer and actress who, in the early 1930s, became a film director for the ascendant Third Reich. Today, she remains famous—or infamous—for capturing the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg and beyond (resulting in the stunning and propagandistic *Triumph of the Will*) and filming the 1936 Berlin Olympics (resulting in *Olympia*, which virtually invented sports photography and cinematography). For reasons that are obvious and not so, many feel Riefenstahl was complicit in the crimes of Hitler and his henchmen, while Riefenstahl's own garrulous memoir (running over 1,000 pages) paints her as a mere artist, consummately apolitical, a compulsive cineaste oblivious to—if swept up by—history. In 2004, I directed *The Imaginary, All-True Leni Riefenstahl Show*, a play about Riefenstahl addressing her legacy's chief question: Is it possible to separate great art from the abhorrent politics of the artist?

Harrison zooms past this question. His interest is in Riefenstahl's effort to make a film about Penthesilia, the tragic Amazon queen memorialized in the early 19th century by German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist. Reports vary as to how much film Riefenstahl shot, but that's irrelevant: in a dramatic masterstroke, the playwright imagines Riefenstahl's film as it could have been, especially with the obstreperous filmmaker in the lead.

And Harrison and director Ken Rus Schmoll hit pay dirt with Rebecca Wisocky as Riefenstahl. Despite stylistic inconsistencies in the 75-minute work (sometimes high camp;

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sometimes squishy melodrama), Wisocky is pure bedrock: endearingly insouciant, yet blood-curdling.

It can be hard to ensure accuracy regarding all things Riefenstahl, so I'll assume its Harrison's conceit to imagine her hiring a Jew, called *The Man* (Brian Sgambati), to play opposite her in the film; to conceive of her sister, called *The Extra* (Heidi Schreck), as a lesbian (she did have a brother, though); and to picture Riefenstahl hiring a young telegram deliverer, called *The Boy* (Gio Perez), plunked into the film as well. It seems hackneyed to report that the men, essentially trapped in Riefenstahl's universe (lest they be sent to a work camp) fall in love, yet Harrison unfurls that plot point with delicacy. It also triggers every wonderful, horrible element of Riefenstahl's personality as her vaunted relationship with the Nazis begins to sour. And all of this is smartly amplified by Sue Rees' main set piece: an ekkyklema, or moving platform, and titled projections.

Sgambati, Schreck and Perez are also pitch-perfect. Sgambati's stentorian, overmodulated voice makes him the quintessential Riefenstahlian he-man, redolent of the men with whom she co-starred in silent action pictures in the 1920s. Schreck exudes the meek subservience all Riefenstahl acolytes needed down to a science in order to survive. Petite as a sprite, Perez exemplifies the drive for physical perfection Riefenstahl demanded in all she did, including photographing the Nuba in Africa and the underwater films of reefs and fish that symbolized her deeply frustrating postwar years.

Harrison offers neither answers nor apologies for Riefenstahl, which is good, for she deserves neither. What she deserves is exploration, and, as in Harrison's *Doris to Darlene*, currently running at Playwrights Horizons, the playwright overuses third-person narrative technique to chart the journey. Fortunately, this time Harrison's focus is clearer, and he doesn't shrink away from writing soaring revelatory scenes. Might that have been a triumph of the will?



CARL SKUTCH

CLUBBED THUMB SUMMERWORKS 2008 If you thought the playwright Rachel Sheinkin came out of nowhere three years ago with her book for “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee,” or if “The Thugs” was the first Adam Bock play you ever saw, you are most likely not familiar with Clubbed Thumb. This small company, which has been producing the work of relatively unknown playwrights for years, presented scripts by both these writers before they had more mainstream successes, and it has produced early works by a number of others who later went on to more well-trafficked places like Playwrights Horizons and Manhattan Theater Club.

In order to say someday that you knew the early work of Sally Oswald or Sigrid Gilmer, get to the 13th annual Clubbed Thumb Summerworks festival, continuing through June 28. This weekend will feature the final performances of “Vendetta Chrome,” by Ms. Oswald (with Jenny Seastone Stern, above left, and Lisa Rafaela Clair), and the opening of the last show in the series, Ms. Gilmer’s “Slavey.” (The first production in the short three-show season, “Gentleman Caller,” by Ann Marie Healy, closed on June 14.)

In Ms. Oswald’s comedy, set in 1892, Vendetta is a student at a Victorian-era finishing school for girls in Chicago, struggling to keep up with the rest of the girls in her elocution class while family scandals pop up at home. “Slavey” is a more modern tale, set in the not-too-distant future, when climbing the social ladder and doing as the super rich do means having your very own slave. (Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street, SoHo; 212-352-3101, theatermania.com; \$18.)

STEVEN McELROY

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The New York Times



Pictured: Jenny Seastone Stern and Lisa Rafaela Clair in a scene from Vendetta Chrome (photo © Carl Skutch)

nytheatre.com review

Kelly Aliano · June 16, 2008

Clubbed Thumb's current production, *Vendetta Chrome*, written by Sally Oswald and directed by Alexis Poledouris, is a profound and hilarious look at the life of

young Miss Vendetta Chrome as she begins attending a somewhat bizarre school for girls. When we first meet Vendetta, she is about to start school at an all-girl academy which her father has recently purchased and of which he is now, therefore, headmaster. Vendetta hopes that her father's status will ensure her popularity with the other students. However, the other girls are suspicious of Vendetta, believing that she has an all-too-easy life.

Unfortunately, Vendetta's life is not as rosy as the others may believe it to be. Her father desires to marry Vendetta's elocution teacher, Mrs. Bosworth, and also happens to owe \$200,000 in debt to some mobsters. Vendetta hopes to find a way to put a stop to her father's impending marriage—as she is unaware of the unpaid sum, the nuptials seem to be her most pressing crisis—but she is unable to execute a plan to do so. Vendetta's life begins to change, hopefully for the better, quite possibly for the worse, and certainly for the weirder, when a mysterious woman appears, claiming to be able to tell Vendetta's fortune.

From here, the plot of the play unfolds almost like a well-made melodrama, with obscured parentage, the revelation of multiple secrets, and the unmasking of a hidden crime. The fortune the woman reveals appears to relate to Vendetta's life—particularly her family history—and plays out as scenes between this woman and a woman who bears an oddly coincidental resemblance to Mrs. Bosworth. This is consistent with the tale that is being unveiled, and with a significant convention of the piece—one where actors play more than one role. The cast features only one man, Sam Breslin Wright, who brilliantly portrays Algernon Chrome, but the story involves other male characters (notably the men to whom Algernon owes money) played by members of the female ensemble. The young women who double in these roles, Lisa Rafaela Clair, Caroline Tamas, and Jenny Seastone Stern, so completely transform into these male identities that it takes a long moment before one realizes that it is actually women playing these parts.

This doubling of roles is simultaneously a clever way for the company to keep the cast small and for the play to emphasize its central theme of gender performance. Underneath the witty humor, the play operates as a shrewd study of how one's gender identity can be constructed, and, additionally, can be performed. For example, the girls are all learning poses iconic of how a proper young woman should look when faced with certain emotions. On the other hand, these proper-young-ladies-in-training are forbidden to enact the more "arousing" poses (such as the "dancing girl") and are forced to play basketball in secret. The other possible future that seems to be suggested for these girls is as sexual objects; Mrs. Bosworth hopes to sell Vendetta to Algernon's creditors as payment for his debt.

Despite this, the entire play operates as ingenious subterfuge to the traditional "virgin or whore" constructions set out for female identity. Mrs. Bosworth asserts herself as the powerful one in her relationship: not only is her fiancé confined to a wheelchair, but we see him staying at home, slaving in

front of the oven preparing a pheasant, while she not only goes to work but also envisions and initiates a plot to settle his debt. In a world almost entirely devoid of men, the young schoolgirls are still able to become involved in romantic complications among themselves. The play is able to present these flirtations without ever coming across as a heavy-handed feminist or gay work. We see a patriarchal world, but one where women prove their capability to withstand life without the direct support of a male counterpart.

The entire company is excellent, and the direction keeps this play from becoming overly perplexing. There are moments when the plot is hard to follow, but the confusion is consistently cleared up quite quickly. Overall, it is a truly enjoyable performance. This idea of "performance" is integral to the piece itself—this is very much a play about performing. The girls are being taught to perform emotions, the fortune cannot be told but must instead be acted out, and gender is very much a construct that is both portrayed based on the norms dictated by society's demands and railed against by subtle acts of rebellion like girls hiking up their skirts in order to play basketball. The play also proves to be a hilarious way to spend an evening. Clubbed Thumb has constructed a truly great play—one that is both about something important while still being incredibly entertaining.

VENUE

Ohio Theatre

CAST

Ariana Venturi, Sam Breslin Wright, Jeanine Serralles, Ginger Eckert, Tracee Chimo, Rebecca Hart, Lisa Rafaela Clair, Caroline Tamas, Jenny Seastone Stern

AUTHOR

Sally Oswald

DIRECTOR

Alexis Poledouris

SETS

Jason Simms

LIGHTING

Gina Scherr

COSTUMES

Jessica Pabst

MUSIC

Joe Varca

CHOREOGRAPHER

Tracy Bersley

STAGE MANAGER

Theresa Flanagan

PRODUCING

COMPANY

Clubbed Thumb

Posted: Mon., Jun. 16, 2008, 3:24pm PT

Vendetta Chrome

By [MARILYN STASIO](#)

Summer festival fare doesn't have to be silly, lightweight fun -- but it's nice when that turns out to be the case, as with "Vendetta Chrome," a spoof on the inane mannerisms (and innate worthlessness) of Victorian education for young ladies. There's a pointed feminist message underlying Sally Oswald's saucy sendup of the elocution classes taught with a straight face in girls' schools in the 1890s. But it doesn't get in the way of the giddier pleasures of this broadly stylized production, helmed by Alexis Poledouris in the antic style associated with those theatrical provocateurs at Clubbed Thumb.

Oswald claims inspiration from an 1892 theatrical manual, "Dramatic Studies and Selections for Amateurs," written by Bessie Bryant Bosworth and presumably taken with the utmost seriousness by Victorian elocution teachers. Instead of swotting classic Greek texts like the boys, girls donned flowing Grecian robes over their bulky school uniforms (an indignity hilariously imagined by costumer Jessica Pabst) and were trained instead in the "classical" poses of human expression.

Communicating the ludicrousness of such a class is the headless, one-armed statue of a Greek goddess that dominates Jason Simms' artfully austere school setting. The subtle cruelty of this Victorian education also comes across in Tracy Bersley's toe-in-cheek choreography, through the awkward efforts of a class of schoolgirls to emulate the graceful movements of their inanimate model.

Under the baleful eye of Bessie Bosworth (a stern taskmistress in Jeanine Serralles' serenely sadistic performance), a gaggle of girls awkwardly goes through the drill of portraying such maidenly attitudes as Horror, Fright and Grief when they would rather be pounding one another in a mean game of basketball. Or tormenting poor, pathetic Vendetta (the most innocent of virginal victims, as played by fresh-faced Ariana Venturi), whose widowed, wheelchair-bound father (Sam Breslin Wright) has acquired the school in an effort to win Miss Bosworth's heart, if she actually has one.

Without getting overly anachronistic about it, Oswald makes some tough and funny observations about the wiliness of adolescent girls, so adroit at following idiotic adult directives while secretly pursuing their own, socially forbidden agendas. But we are not talking "Maedchen in Uniform," here -- or even the Five Lesbian Brothers -- and heavy socio-political satire is not this scribe's overriding theatrical goal.

A flawless theatrical style is more the point of this production, whose success is better measured by its fluid interpolation of Katherine Dunham dance poses with the wide-eyed grimaces and jerky movements of a Mary Pickford silent movie.

Which is not to say that lessons of life are not learned. Take the scene on the railway track in which Vendetta becomes an orphan. Brave girl that she is, she attempts to apply the lessons of her elocution classes to a crisis in the real world -- namely, the appearance of a locomotive bearing down on her father and Miss Bosworth, who are tied to the track. In a show of classical spirit, Vendetta dutifully performs exactly as she was taught in school. But, alas, arching one's neck and extending one's arm doesn't quite do the trick.