



CLARE MCDONALD AND
MALAKHAI SCHNELL IN *TREEHOUSE*

OUT ON A LIMB

Cottage Theatre tells a tale of love and loss in the world premiere of Joe Musso's Treehouse

It was a packed house at the Cottage Theatre this weekend, which is hosting the world premiere of Joe Musso's play *Treehouse*. Cottage Theatre was picked to be just one of six theaters in the country to produce a new play from the American Association of Community Theater NewPlayFest, an organization dedicated to producing and publishing new scripts nationwide.

Musso's script, which already won the Todd McNearey National Playwriting Award, was chosen from more than 300 submissions, and with the man himself in the house all the way from Birmingham, Alabama, the pressure was on for the cast and crew of the small-town theater.

The nervous excitement was tangible in the first few minutes of the opening act: Arms and legs awkwardly moving about on stage to a rhythm no one has ever heard before, but director Tara Wibrew and the small cast of seasoned local actors managed to quickly establish their own beat, faithfully bringing life to Musso's vision from Stone Canyon Road.

Treehouse is the complicated, albeit sweetly simplistic, story of a messy haired teenager, Johnny (Malakhai Schnell), who is convinced that he is actually a 53-year-old Shakespearean scholar who has somehow traveled back in

time from the present to 1980. Nearly the entire play is set in Johnny's adolescent refuge: a four-limbed, sparsely decorated treehouse (set design by Kory Weimer) scattered with relics of a past that continues to haunt him.

Musso's story is filled with all the Shakespearean elements one might expect: tragedy, comedy, history, time travel; however, the heart of the story centers on the awkward silences and all-too-sudden movements surrounding the budding romance between Johnny and his Shakespearean muse, Alana (Clare McDonald).

Schnell and McDonald are almost painfully charming as clumsy, skater-jeans-wearing teenagers navigating their way through the bog and the butterflies.

Johnny's relationship with his bewildered and concerned mother (Chelsey Megli) is also quite familiar for anyone who has been caught drinking by mom, and then immediately offered homemade lemonade.

And what Shakespearean comedy is complete without a couple of crude fools playing air guitar in the forest? Blake Nelson and John Eckstine play Oliver and Ben, loveably vulgar friends of Johnny's youth. Who knew the Bard was so fond of dick jokes?

Musso's script and, subsequently, Wibrew's beautifully somber interpretation are thick with symbolism: A single

uneaten peach, a case of Coca-Cola and a busy rope ladder make up the innocence of Johnny's youth. A bottle of whiskey, a handgun and a haunting alcoholic wife (Tracy Nygar), subtly sipping a cocktail in the dimly lit backdrop, represent an inescapably tragic life.

Sadly, Johnny remains stuck with one foot in his past and the other in his future, plagued by his own humanity, alcoholism and the events that leave him broken in an open field of milkweed on a stormy summer night.

Ultimately, Johnny's journey is neither redemptive nor restorative, but rather a tale of mere survival. The play neglects to answer the obvious questions or rather outwardly rejects them, opting instead for simpler summations and typical Shakespearean ambiguity.

In fact, there is one moment near the end that seems a little too spelled out and yet loose in its explanation, disrupting the fluidity of the previous acts.

All in all, though, *Treehouse* is as refreshing as a cool glass of lemonade from your mom, or a kiss from the weird lit girl at your high school. It is a must-see for anyone who appreciates the written word and the transcendence of the human struggle. — Alexis DeFiglia

Treehouse runs through Aug. 26 at the Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove; tickets and times at cottage theatre.org.

TRICKY DICK IS BACK

This time he's neither tan nor rested — but he certainly is honest by current standards

Richard Nixon has never looked so good.

Once seen as a disgraced despot who — despite his earlier protestation that “I am not a crook!” — finally admitted he was in on the Watergate conspiracy to steal secrets from the Democratic Party, Nixon is now remembered more as the architect of a forward-thinking foreign policy that opened relations with China, thus forcing the demise of the Soviet bloc.

As a result, Peter Morgan's historical play *Frost/Nixon* seems more quaint than dramatic, a nostalgic look at what it was like to have a president bound in any way by standards of statesmanship and decency. Ah, the old days.

For its final show of the season, Very Little Theatre opened a production of *Frost/Nixon* on Friday, Aug. 10, two days after the 44th anniversary of Nixon's resignation from office.

Morgan constructed his play around a series of videotaped interviews that David Frost did with Nixon in 1977. Frost, a British talk-show host, was widely considered by more-experienced journalists to be a lightweight, and the thrust of the play is how he gradually pushes Nixon toward confronting and admitting the truth.

What this means, of course, is that *Frost/Nixon* can be slow and talky, and the VLT production, directed by Darryl Marzyck, certainly is. The first act drags, but stay in your seats: The whole play is utterly redeemed by a searing scene in Act II involving a phone call between Frost and a very drunken Nixon to set up the final interview.

Damon Noyes gives us a serviceable Frost, half Brit dandy and half brooding philosopher, but Mike Hawkins falls short of delivering Nixon's unmistakable darkness. His Nixon is, frankly, too sweet.

Blake Beardsley does an excellent job as a caustic James “Sonny” Reston, one of a pair of newspapermen whom Frost hired as investigators and whose work led to that final confession.

But I wonder whether anyone younger than 60 cares enough anymore about Watergate. Who remembers people like Swifty Lazar and Mike Wallace? They're both played excellently here by John White.

But do figures like Lazar and Wallace matter anymore in the era of “fake news”? — Bob Keefer

Frost/Nixon continues at Very Little Theatre through Aug. 25. Info at TheVLT.com.