

Fine direction, cast make 'Hair Frenzy' a triumph

BY JUDY HARRISON
BDN STAFF

Penobscot Theatre Company's world premiere of "Hair Frenzy" is a triumph for Orono playwright Travis G. Baker, thanks to fine directing and an impeccable cast.

In case there were doubters, Baker's new comedy, which sometimes borders on farce, proves he can hold up a mirror to Mainers' foibles and idiosyncrasies without being disrespectful. "Hair Frenzy" is a tighter and funnier show than "One Blue Tarp," produced by PTC two years ago, because it doesn't try to take on big social issues such as same-sex relationships.

Set in the hair salon from which the play takes its name in the fictional town of Clara, Maine,

"Hair Frenzy" is about leaving and coming home, opportunities lost and found and the twists and turns life can suddenly take.

It also is less about "people from away" than "One Blue Tarp" was but includes a clash with local town government over a sign ordinance. As with many new plays, the first act is more polished than the second, but the resolution of the plot rings true and the show is, at times, hysterical.

Much of the credit for the success of the play goes to director Dominick Varney and his fine cast of Maine comedic actors, several of whom are experienced in improvisation. Varney is an expert at pacing a comedy in which the jokes rely more on character

than slapstick and at molding a cast into an ensemble.

An experienced actor, Varney knows just when to crank up the action for laughs and when to pause so the audience doesn't miss a funny line or visual joke. As a director at PTC and other theater companies, Varney can milk and mine the best out of fine, good, mediocre and bad material. With "Hair Frenzy," he had a solid script to work from.

Varney also expertly cast the show. The actors work so well together that one different person in one part could have spun it out of control and off the rails.

Jennifer Shepard, co-founder of ImprovAcadia in Bar Harbor, plays Tina, the owner of the Hair Frenzy salon and a single mom
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MAGNUS STARK | PENOBSCOT THEATRE COMPANY

The latest Penobscot Theatre production, "Hair Frenzy," will be performed at the Bangor Opera House through Feb. 14.



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK | BDN

Resident teaching artist Ben Layman (right) and director of education Amy Roeder of the Penobscot Theater Company work with students at Indian Island School recently.

Wabanaki tales

Theater program helps Indian Island schoolchildren prepare performance

BY SHELBY HARTIN
BDN STAFF

"Mahtoqehs didn't like these People very much," one of Indian Island School's eighth-graders says, trying out the word at first, then confidently repeating it in full as she rehearses her part in an upcoming performance by her class.

Roger Paul, Wabanaki language teacher at Indian Island School, nods, a smile stretching across his face. He gives her an ecstatic double thumbs up and she smiles back, encouraged.

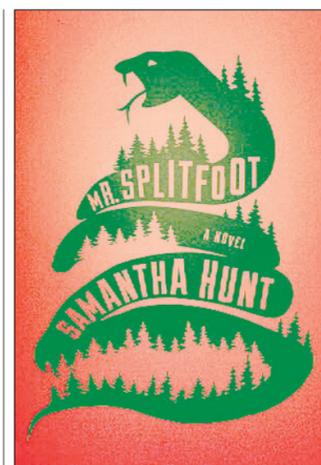
Mahtoqehs, a light-hearted trickster animal of Wabanaki folktales, is one of many characters Indian Island School's fifth-, sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders brought to life during a recent performance put on for their family and friends Friday, Jan. 29, in the Indian Island School gymnasium.

The performance was created as part of Penobscot Theatre Company's residency program. Amy Roeder, PTC's director of education, and Ben Layman, resident teaching artist, spent five days with children from Indian Island School. With the help of language teacher Roger Paul, Roeder and Layman created dramatizations

of folktales rooted in native culture for the Indian Island community to enjoy.

"We were specifically addressing Wabanaki and Penobscot culture and wrote pieces based on cultural stories that have been handed down from generation to generation," Roeder said.

The PTC residency program is offered for a fee to schools to complement curriculum. Indian Island School participated for the first time this year, choosing to book a weeklong engagement culminating in the performance. Last year PTC did residencies of various lengths at nine different schools, and there are seven schools set
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Reader patience pays off in 'Splitfoot'

BY CONNIE OGLE
MIAMI HERALD (TNS)

MR. SPLITFOOT by Samantha Hunt; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (318 pages, \$24)

"All stories are ghost stories," says Cora, the narrator of part of Samantha Hunt's unsettling third novel "Mr. Splitfoot." Maybe she's right: Our pasts inevitably haunt us, whoever and wherever we are.

But that title conjures up something more frightening than a ghost, more menacing than your garden variety dead person. "Mr. Splitfoot" sounds like a beast of dark appetites, a stealer of souls. His presence is represented by black pages separating every chapter, each adorned with a single white hoof print — the novel is beautifully designed, from these pages to its provocative jacket cover. We may not know who "Mr. Splitfoot is," exactly, but we know instinctively we want no part of him.

Writer of the novels "The Seas" and "The Invention of Everything Else," a finalist for the Orange Prize and winner of the Bard Fiction Prize, Hunt maintains a dark and disturbing atmosphere throughout this intriguing, well-drawn gothic, creating a terrain that's familiar and yet alien and unnerving at the same time. Two stories unspool, as the characters work their ways toward ominous revelations.

The first — and most compelling — narrative involves Ruth and Nat, teenagers on the verge of "aging out" at the grim Love of Christ! Foster Home, Farm and Mission in upstate New York. At 18, they'll be dumped unceremoniously on the
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BOOK
REVIEW

Orono program to feature Kneisel Hall faculty member

BY SHELBY HARTIN
BDN STAFF

As a musician and teacher, Laurie Smukler has traveled across the country, educating students at conservatories and music schools such as the University of Michigan, Peabody Conservatory in Maryland and the University of Tennessee at Memphis.

Soon, she will bring her musical talents to Orono, where she'll perform on violin with pianist Robert McDonald for an all-Bartok program at 3 p.m. Feb. 7 at the University of Maine's Minsky Recital Hall. The program will include Bela Bartok's Rhapsody No.1 for violin and piano, Deuxieme Sonata for violin and piano and Pre-

miere Sonata for violin and piano.

It is their first stop for a multiple-show schedule that will culminate in a New York performance.

Smukler, who was born in Ohio, lives in New York and is on the faculty of the prestigious music school The Juilliard School. She has taught at Purchase College Conservatory of

Music and Bard College Conservatory of Music, both in New York. But for years she has worked in Maine, returning to Blue Hill each summer to teach at Kneisel Hall.

"There's very little extraneous, competitive, artificial influence [at Kneisel Hall]," Smukler said. "It's about creating music."
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10 AM - 4 PM, \$125/person. All materials provided.

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February 9, 7 PM / *Maine Film Center*
Chinatown (a Science on Screen event with guest speaker Jim Wilfong) at Railroad Square Cinema

theater + dance

January 29 - 31 + February 5 - 7 / *Waterville Opera House*
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February 13
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