

Hair

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struggling to raise her daughter and keep her business going. Shepard's character and performance are the most realistic in the show. Female theatergoers know this woman because they either are her, are related to her or know someone just like Tina. That's because of the depth Shepard gives the character.

As Toryn, the small-town girl who's made it big as a movie star, A.J. Mooney gives the character just the right blend of entitled star attitude and down-to-earth practicality. In portraying Toryn as a survivor, Mooney is able to show the audience that skills and lessons learned in small towns are valuable — even in Hollywood.

Amanda Sinko and Jeri Mislser give broad comedic performances as Kaisee and Mrs. Bonner, respectively. Kaisee is the wild and showy stylist who rents a chair in Tina's shop, and Sinko portrays her perfectly as the big-city woman stuck in a backwater town. Mrs. Bonner is an elderly, retired school teacher who sees Tina once a week but won't

let Kaisee touch her hair. Sinko and Mislser play well off each other as Kaisee and Mrs. Bonner spar over changing morals and hair-styles.

Rachel Palmer, who portrays Tina's daughter Ella, is a natural on stage. She's comfortable in the part and give a great performance. However, she has a bad habit of fiddling with her costumes — something that's distracting for the audience.

While all the women are wonderful in their roles, the energy during Saturday's opening night performance came from Ira Kramer, Brad LaBree and Jason Preble. Kramer, as the Swedish actor Gustav, who follows Toryn to Clara, is magnificent. Sporting a blonde wig, he is almost unrecognizable from roles in previous productions. Kramer's Gustav behaves like a large, lumbering, egotistical St. Bernard puppy. He is adorable and impossible not to love.

As Bobtom, LaBree creates a character who hasn't really changed since middle school. His dreams have always been bigger than his talent and his brainpower. In hands of a less skilled actor, Bobtom might have been played as the "village idiot," but LeBree gives



MAGNUS STARK | PENOBSCOT THEATRE COMPANY

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

him just enough heart so his faults can be overlooked.

Jason Preble as Stuart could have created a stereotypical uptight accountant or turned him into Tina's stalker neighbor. Instead Preble, a member of "The Focus Group," which regularly gives improvisational

performances, uses his impeccable timing to make Stuart a loyal, loving fan of Tina's who always will have her back. The actor knows the value of a pause before a punchline, and he understands that Stuart's love of and loyalty to Tina are fine qualities — even as she rejects him again.

Chez Cherry's practical set that Varney's cast make great use of is complimented nicely by Heather Crocker's lighting design and Kevin Koski's costumes.

In a program note, PTC's Producing Artistic Director Bari Newport described launching the production of a new play as "a

risk." While it might have been one for the director, cast and crew, for area theatergoers, it is a welcome gift.

"Hair Frenzy" runs through Feb. 14 at the Bangor Opera House. For information, call 942-3333 or visit penobscottheatre.org.

Splitfoot

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street, like Ruth's older sister El, who vanished when Ruth was 5. But for now they and other unwanted or orphaned misfits survive under the watchful and megalomaniacal eye of Father Arthur.

That exclamation mark in the home's name, by the way, denotes not enthusiasm but fanaticism: "At Love of Christ! children feel the Lord, and the Lord is often furious and unpredictable," Hunt writes of these

lean, hungry years, when Ruth and Nat shiver in a house that's never warm enough — in temperature or in empathy. "No Walt Disney, soda pop or women's slacks pass his threshold. The children milk goats, candle and collect eggs, preserve produce, and make yogurt from cultures they've kept alive for years. Blessed be the bacteria."

There's a Mother, too, on occasion, drug-addled and empty-headed, but what Ruth and Nat treasure is each other. Sisters, they call each other, because that's the only word Ruth knows that means a person who

cares for you. "One twin bed. They slept foot to face. Two heads on one body, joined like a knave card. ... Their intimacy was obscene." But they aren't lovers. Just halves of a damaged whole.

Nat, though, can talk to the dead. Summoning an invisible entity — Mr. Splitfoot — as a conduit, he conjures up long-vanished mothers for the other children at the home — for a price. Then an enterprising salesman, Mr. Bell, shows up with a proposal: He can introduce Ruth and Nat to desperate people outside the home who will pay a lot

of money to contact the dead, cash Ruth and Nat can use to strike out on their own. Soon Ruth learns the rhythms of grifting, pretending to be talking to the dead herself. But she never doubts Nat's connection to Mr. Splitfoot, even when it leads them into danger.

In the second story set decades later — the chapters alternate throughout the book — we meet Cora, Ruth's niece, who works at a job she hates and spends too much time on the Internet. "My computer and I spend a lot of time together," she confesses.

"Like a dog and its master, I'm starting to look like it, act like it." She's at loose ends, pregnant with her married lover's child, her future uncertain. Then Ruth shows up unannounced, unable — or unwilling? — to speak. She wants to show Cora something, so Cora drops everything and follows her on a trek through a feverish landscape of poverty, fear and threat.

Believing a pregnant woman would abruptly leave home to wander on foot across New York without knowing why requires a huge suspension

of disbelief; accepting Nat's unnatural ability comes more easily because Hunt's descriptive powers and chilling imagination are formidable. Another frustration? On occasion, Cora's and Ruth's journey seems a bit teased out to conform to the book's structure.

But don't abandon hope. As Cora and Ruth keep walking, ever closer to whatever surprise — or horror — lies ahead, your patience will pay off. If all stories are ghost stories, if our pasts do haunt us, maybe they can save us, too.

Wabanaki

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for this year, including Indian Island School.

"We haven't been doing a lot of residencies in the area — it's been mostly far away — so it was also a chance for us to get to know our neighbors," Roeder said.

Indian Island School, which was built in 1988, displays many parts of native culture itself. Murals of tribal ancestors decorate walls and a smattering of native language can be found posted around the school, adding elements of art, education and culture to immerse students in the workings of their past, present and future.

Rehearsals for the performance took place in a cultural building on school grounds, where basket weaving is taught to the children and handmade items sit in boxes, waiting for their makers to return.

Throughout the week, Layman, Roeder and Paul occupied the building, creating separate performances with three groups of students. They began their days with vocal exercises, stretching and activities to spark their creativity, then went immediately into rehearsing the content of their scripts.

"The students grabbed on with both hands, and they really took this project as their own," Paul said of the students' participation.

For Paul, who acted as liaison between the school and PTC and also attended and oftentimes participated in their rehearsals, encouraging students to use their native language in this way was simply another way to keep it alive.

"These stories are usually told in the wintertime to the children," Paul said. "There are value teachings in these stories, but they're told in a format where children can understand and enjoy them."

Interspersed throughout the stories, two of which Paul put into writing himself, were words native to the Penobscots and Wabanaki as a whole.

The sixth- and seventh-graders began the evening

by performing a tale titled "How the Chipmunk Got His Stripes," followed by a fifth-grade rendition of "The Woods Monster" and concluding with "Why Rabbit Has No Tail" by the eighth-graders.

"Within our language is the perspective of our culture," Paul said. "We don't have to teach much of our culture if we teach the language. Our language is so descriptive. It's describes the world through the eyes of our ancestors."

Before the performance began in the school's gymnasium, young children scurried back and forth, giggling and shouting. Parents filed through the doors, filling the bleachers, while the tribe's elders

took seats designated for them in the front. Speakers of the language reacted noticeably when hearing words they recognized spoken aloud.

When the eighth-graders performed, one child yelled "okiya," which, roughly translated to English, means "ouch." The crowd erupted in laughter when hearing the word spoken as part of the performance.

Roeder said she was overwhelmed by the turnout and the support from the school.

One of the custodians stayed after hours to help decorate, the art teacher

pitched in with backdrops for the performance and school faculty banded together to create a spread of treats for everyone to enjoy once the show was over.

"Everybody in the school pulled together to make it happen," Roeder said.

As the students stood in front of the crowd Friday evening, they recited words from their native language confidently, while Paul watched from the side, smiling and nodding.

"The more we encourage them to use our language, the longer it survives," Paul said.

Smukler

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The environment and the people have kept her invested in coming back to the state every year to teach.

"They're real musicians who are honest with the music and honest with themselves and are trying to achieve real art," she said.

But that wasn't her first experience with Maine.

"My mother was a painter in galleries in New York. ... My family came up and spent 10 days on Deer Isle when I was 13 or 14 and spent time with painter Dan Hodermarsky," Smukler said. "We swam in the lakes amongst the water lilies, and that began my love affair with Maine."

For both Smukler and McDonald, the Maine performance will be a welcome retreat. McDonald has played in Portland, with musicians such as Isaac Stern, and at Blue Hill's Kneisel Hall. Smukler said she has grown as a musician and teacher since her time began in 1997.

Bartok's pieces were written in the 1920s, but both Smukler and McDonald said that they're still accessible and tap into emotions as applicable today as they were almost 100 years ago.

The two sonatas were written for a woman named Jelly d'Aranyi who Bartok was quite fond of. His pieces are "fiery," as Smukler described it, and "fantastical," in McDonald's words.

"It's rather important [audiences] understand that the works are not so conven-

tional — they have moments of great beauty, and the sheer originality in the voice of these pieces is still so striking to this day," McDonald said.

Audiences can expect a different chamber music experience that will surprise at every turn, according to



Smukler

McDonald. At times, the piano and violin may seem to spar with one another.

"When Bartok puts the two together they often sound like they're going off in their own worlds, even though the ensemble demands are very specific," McDonald said.

Smukler and McDonald plan to speak about the music beforehand to prepare listeners for the experience.

"The point is sharing. We

want to share our work and discover these pieces with the audience," Smukler said.

As for their visit to Maine, both Smukler and McDonald are happy to be coming back.

"I have a love affair with Maine," Smukler said. "It's a second home by this time."

Tickets for the performance are \$28 for adults and \$8 for students, and they can be purchased on the Collins Center for the Arts website or by calling 581-1755.



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