

# Arts & Culture

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## THEATER

### One Act Play Festival kicks off season with a slate of plays

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

For Silver Spring Stage, their one act play festival does many things: it kicks off their 2006-2007 season and serves as a training ground for actors, directors and increasingly, local area playwrights. Each weekend has a different slate of plays, but opening weekend was a homage to local playwright Russell Aiuto and famous playwright Anton Chekhov.

Wouldn't you know it, they saved the best by far for last. Ted Schneider directed the Anton Chekhov one act *The Brute*. If you cannot imagine Chekhov being funny, this short work will change your mind. An unsophisticated man named Smirnov wants Mrs. Papov to pay up her late husband's debt, and in the process they argue and challenge each other to a duel even as they fall in love with one another. Chuck Spitulnik and Toni Carmine are great as the literally feuding lovers, while Ira Haber steals the show as hapless servant Luka.

Meanwhile *The Gold Lunch* by Ron Carlson is a humorous parody of the Olympics – sort of. The medalist is actor David Gorsline, and he won in the Olympic event of Lunch. But it turns out to be “lunch with your ex,” and that proves to be a demanding event. Carlson cunningly uses the Olympic clichés for ex-

ploring a social event, and Gorsline follows through all the way.

These were the two best plays, but the opening work by Russell Aiuto was an intriguing idea. *A Hour in Vienna* explores a historical footnote. Legend has it that in turn of the century Vienna, two men got stuck on an elevator, and those two men were Vladimir Lenin and Sigmund Freud. Aiuto imagines that meeting with a humorous pairing of Stephen Shetler's agitated Lenin verbally dueling with Robert Weinzimer's ever probing Freud. It was quite interesting, especially director Ivan Kovatchev's many imaginative touches such as having the two actors literally waltz onto stage. The opening monologue notes this was during a time when both Lenin and Freud faced rebellion from younger followers, but Aiuto's play only follows Lenin's current hassle. It would have been stronger if Freud's travails were also explored.

The weakest works were in the middle. *Fitch Todd* by Jeffrey Gold has an interesting premise of a classical composer faking illness and imminent death, mostly for attention. It is a light comedy with a kicker of an ending, but little more than that. However, when was the last time you saw a play that mentioned Paul Hindemith?

Meanwhile Aiuto's second play *Concerning Love*, adapted from a story by Chekhov, was well done but



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Gigi Felix (Meredith Todd), Jerry Fill (Earl Browning), and David Weaver (Fitch Todd) (l-r)

too sprawling a work. A college graduate took over the farm to pay off his parent's debt and ended up being a farmer all his life. He talks about love to some friends and remembers a past affair of the heart. The constant black outs and lengthy flashback made this very choppy, and what was meant to be a semi-serious exploration on the nature of love turned out to be surprisingly

rambling for a Chekhov work.

There is a different program each weekend, and I believe all the remaining plays are original works—they are all listed as “presented by special arrangement with the playwright.” Running Aug. 24-27 is *The Last Goodnight* by local playwright Steve LaRocque. Also that weekend is *Year of the Rooster* by Mark Lamberg, *Relativity* by Steve Silvers and

*Daydream* by Heather Burns and Melissa Robinson.

Weekend three, running Aug. 31-Sept. 3, features another LaRocque play, *Chess Game*, another Aiuto play, *One of a Kind*, and the intriguingly titled *The Completion of Rose Wasserman* by Spencer Watson.

The one act play festival kicks off the 2006-2007 season at Silver Spring Stage. Next up is the P. G. Wodehouse adaptation of the French farce *The Play's the Thing*, followed by that classic piece of Americana, *Bus Stop*.

2007 begins with the comedy *Visiting Mr. Green*, then *Dimly Perceived Threats to the System* and the Canadian drama *The Drawer Boy*. Another classic piece of Americana, *Morning's at Seven* follows and the season ends with *Never the Sinner*, a look at the infamous Leopard and Loeb murder case.

The one act play festival, which a different program each weekend, continues at Silver Spring Stage through Sept. 3. For more information on this show or the upcoming 2006-2007 season, call (301) 593-6036.

**One Act Play Festival**  
**Silver Spring Stage**

★★★

### Popular musical *Evita* whips out big tunes and soft whispers

By David Cannon  
Sentinel Arts Critic

If you go to see Open Circle's current production of *Evita*, playing at the Round House Theater in Silver Spring, go for the singing. The voices from the leads to the chorus are strong and powerful. As for the production itself, it is more uneven – go for the voices.

*Evita* is not Andrew Lloyd Webber's most popular musical, but it might be his best. It is a surprisingly difficult score to pull off – at times the songs are very melodic and at other times more angular and disjointed—and the music is often percussive and dissonant, despite its frequent recourse to popular musical styles. It is almost a pop opera – there is almost no spoken dialogue.

This is of course the famous musical about the rise and fall of Eva Peron, the B movie actress who became the first lady of

Argentina when her husband Juan Peron came to power. Many thought Evita was the true power behind the throne, but her sudden death at a young age gave conspiracy theorists plenty to chew on. The musical gives directors plenty of wiggle room – they can make this piece a hatchet job, pure and simple, or find a more sympathetic portrayal of the lead character.

Joe Banno gives us a great Evita in Amanda Johnson – at times angry and at other moments sultry, Johnson can belt out the big tune and then go down to almost a whisper. Rob McQuay's Che could be stronger in his pop flavored songs, but he has Che's acid-toned sarcasm down pat. The supporting roles are also well handled – including Scott Sedar in an interestingly ambivalent performance as Juan Peron and Stephen McWilliams as a true lounge lizard as singer Antonio Magaldi. It was interesting to see Banno not drop these characters immediately, and someone like Magaldi reappearing in the background cho-

rus for “Another Suitcase” was a nice touch.

So the music and singing is strong and effective, and the pacing generally quite good. Banno uses the black box set at Round House's Silver Spring space for a partially in the round staging. Audience members sit on the left and right of the playing area, with a large path down the middle. This allows for some very imaginative touches: I loved the intricate café detail of the ensemble at the start of the show, and a true feeling of the crowd watching in rapt attention during the big “Don't Cry for Me Argentina” number that kicks off Act II.

Other moments were not nearly as effective. Wheeling Evita in on a coffin and having the corpse sing in the opening number was an odd choice for this show. Some of the bigger numbers like “Buenos Aires” and “And the Money Kept Rolling In” seemed stagnant, while Che on his golf cart cheering on upper class and solidier types in “Dangerous Jade” was a brilliant piece of stage craft. The techni-

cal aspects of the show were well done though they tended to be understated.

Open Circle has a wonderful mission to mount shows with actors with and without disabilities. I found it surprisingly how quickly I forgot that actors were using sign language, for example. Those aspects Banno and his cast and crew have blended very nicely into the show. There are other directorial decisions that I question. My opinion is go for the strong singing throughout, and ignore the occasional directorial stumbles that crop up here and there.

*Evita* continues at the Silver Spring space of Round House Theater, right next to the AFI Theater, through Aug. 27. For more information, call (240) 683-0305.

**Evita**  
**Round House Theater**

★★