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THEATER

Montgomery Advertiser - Montgomery, Ala.

Subjects: Artistic directors; Motion picture directors & producers; Theater; Thanksgiving

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THE TRUMAN SHOW

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival conjures up visions of holidays past with Buddy, Miss Sook and a number of the late storyteller Truman Capote's colorful characters.

"Holiday Memories," based on two of Capote's Southern-style stories, previews at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and opens at 8 p.m. Friday in ASF's Octagon. The show, which blends "The Thanksgiving Visitor" and "A Christmas Memory," was adapted for the stage by Russell Vandenbroucke.

"There have been several adaptations of the (Capote) Christmas story, but, to my knowledge, this is the only one that includes "The Thanksgiving Visitor," said director Bruce Sevy, who is the associate artistic director at the Denver Center Theatre Company and has directed a couple of ASF productions, including "The Last Night of Ballyhoo" in 1999. "I think they work really well together."

The stories recap some of Capote's warmest memories of his childhood in Monroeville. They are told through Buddy, a youngster whose parents send him to live with much older relatives. One of these relatives, Miss Sook, becomes his best friend.

Included are memories such as the annual Thanksgiving gathering, where just about everyone—even Odd Henderson, a bully who picks on Buddy—show up. And Christmas fruitcake making with Miss Sook.

Sevy points out that the play will appeal to people who are not familiar with Capote's work.

"The stories are very compelling even if you have never heard of these characters," he said. "We can all relate to being picked on or watching someone else being picked on."

Actor John Sloan, who portrays the youngster named Buddy, who is loosely based on Capote, agrees.

"The themes are really universal -- friendship, love, family, trust and holidays," said Sloan, who lives in New York City and is acting at ASF for the first time.

The role of Buddy, who is about 7 or 8, was written in the adaptation for an adult actor. The character Truman, who is portrayed by ASF actor Ray Chambers, both serve as narrators throughout the play.

"Ray is sort of my older version," Sloan said. "Sometimes, we share narration, which is drawn from the (Capote) prose."

Sevy is pleased the stage adaptation preserves a lot of the narrative from the stories, including much of the wit and descriptions.

Buddy's best friend, Miss Sook, is portrayed by Sonja Lanzener, who has been at ASF since 1997. Lanzener said she was familiar with Capote's stories, but not terribly familiar with them. She had not seen the film version of "A Christmas Memory."

"Actually, in trying to do some research, I tried to track down a copy (of the Hallmark Hall of Fame film)," she said. She finally obtained a copy after the cast had started rehearsals in October.

"I started watching it, and then I had to stop. I already had an image of her in my mind," she said. "Once that happens, you don't want anything to happen to that image."

Miss Sook is a wonderful character and wonderfully Southern. The 60-something woman plays a major role in Capote's stories, Lanzener said.

Capote describes Miss Sook as the youngest of her siblings, but actually she was the eldest sister, Lanzener said.

"You get the feeling he really was wearing rose-colored glasses when remembering," she said.

Capote does capture the simplicity of South in the 1930s, she said. And that is especially fascinating to Lanzener, a Northerner.

"It is the South, specifically Alabama. I hope people will recognize what he talks about and what the characters are doing," she said. "It is funny, bittersweet, wonderful little pieces."

Adding texture to the pieces are characters such as Odd Henderson, the ancient Mrs. Mary Taylor Wheelwright and one of the Conklin sisters are portrayed by David Ivers and Effie Johnson. Ivers and Johnson play a variety of characters.

Sevy said having Ivers, whose casted as the Man, and Johnson, who is casted as the Woman, portraying everyone except Buddy, Miss Sook and Truman, has been challenging. But it works well.

Staging "Holiday Memories" in the Octagon also works well, he said.

"It is a space for small stories, where you want the audience to get in close, feel like they are really there," Sevy said. "It is equivalent to a closeup in film and makes it cozier."

Lanzener said this should only enhance the audience's feelings.

"I hope 'Holiday Memories' will be like an old friend," she said, "familiar and comfortable."

WANT TO GO?

What: "Holiday Memories," based on two Truman Capote stories and adapted for the stage by Russell Vandenbroucke

When: Previews at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, opens at 8 p.m. Friday and runs through Dec.23

Show times: 7:30 Sunday, Tuesday through Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; no performances Thanksgiving

Where: Alabama Shakespeare Festival, in the Blount Cultural Park

Cost: Tickets range from \$20-\$30

Theatre in the Mind: Dr. Wayne Flynt, a history professor at Auburn University, will lead a free lecture on "Down Home with Truman Capote" at noon Nov. 18

Information: 271-5353

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