

Bennington Theatre, Bennington, VT
Players by Robert Sugarman. Directed by Enrique Segura.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

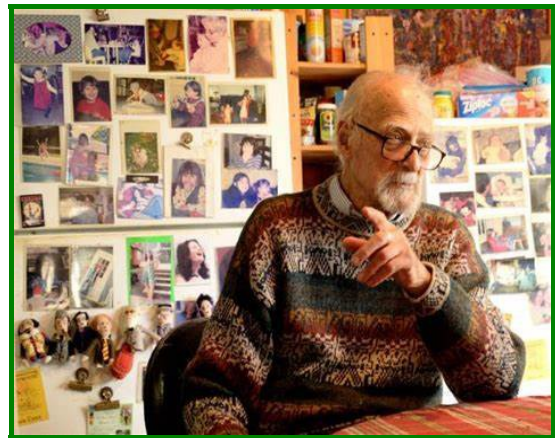
“I never could resist a “prithe.””

At 96 playwright Robert Sugarman is experiencing a revival of his works. The newly reorganized Bennington Theatre in Bennington, Vermont is doing a weekend of performances of his three one-act plays, “**Players**,” and doing a very good job of it. The run is all-too brief but there are still seats available for tonight (Saturday) and tomorrow afternoon. The show was first produced by Oldcastle Theatre Company and directed by its founder, Eric Peterson, in 1984. Peterson attended the opening night performance of this new run and seemed to enjoy it immensely.

The cast are community theatre actors with the exception of one professional, Equity member, Peter Langstaff, who is no stranger to Bennington audiences. He plays two very different roles in the show: a John Barrymore demi-clone, on tour in *Life With Father* but too drunk and frightened to perform properly, and a famous playwright on a college tour who meets up with two old friends and finds himself caught in the dilemma of reminiscences that hurt. As Basil, in his first play, he is extremely funny and a bit touching as he tries to learn the names of his fellow actors. In his second appearance as Bill he is the epitome of distracted elegance, a man with no axe to grind who grinds one anyway, more out of habit than of intention. Both roles are complicated and wide-ranging and he does justice to both.

In the first play, *The Dressing Room*, an actress, distraught after a flubbed performance, receives a visit from a former swain from home in her dressing room. Set in Chicago in 1907 the actress, Josie - played by Tess McHugh, is wild, getting drunk and seen by her friend John as lewd and unacceptable by his local standards. John is nicely played by Danny Lee Townsend. The two characters play out old and new versions of their friendship, come to romantic blows, and ultimately part, her confidence restored and his unsettling experience “of a lifetime” something to cherish in a peculiar, uncomfortable way. The play is filled with laughs and the two actors don’t miss a single one of them.

In the second play, *Life With Actors*, McHugh plays Anne and Townsend plays Hilton, two members of the 1952 company of “Life with Father” who have been awakened by the drunken Basil along with Charley, played by Dan Silver and Mellie played by Debby Goldman. This quartet of wide-awake actors tries to deal with their star whose acting has been terrible and whose memory is stifled by drink. This playlet, which ends the first half of the event, is as funny as the first one but brings a serious tone into the play. The challenges of stardom are addressed



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along with the difficulties of the craft of acting, a topic mostly ignored in shows. The challenges each actor bring into the mix are difficulties for Langstaff's Basil and it is a delight to watch him handle each one.

After the intermission the third play, a three character piece entitled *Visiting Artist*, takes the stage and, set in 1984, addresses the conflicts of success vs. modest success, alcohol vs. reformed alcoholism, sex vs. love and reality vs. memory. Goldman plays wife, mother and artist Janey. Silver plays her husband Hank, a teacher and occasionally produced writer and Langstaff plays Bill, the touring, famous author. The conflict in this work is one of whose memory most closely resembles the truth of their earlier relationships. Sugarman works his linguistic magic in these people and the play sings with a reality not achieved in the earlier works. It is not as funny a play but its dramatic intensity shines in all three performances, particularly in Goldman's exceptionally fine delivery. From beginning to end the play belongs to Janey and the two men, good as they both are, become her targets. All three deliver honest, hard-bitten performances and the evening ends with a slap in the face actuality that is as painful for us as it is Hank and Bill.

The plays in *Players* make a wonderful evening of theater and this troupe of actors does exactly what Sugarman's work needs. Directed by Enrique Segura each act has its own set of solutions to relationships and alcohol consumption and they all come off as real and honest and are, honestly, sublime. This is the first produced show at the new Bennington Theater and it is a fine opening act. Perhaps a new play by Sugarman will hit this stage in the not too distant future. For a 96 year old playwright that would be divine!

+ 10/14/23 +

Players does two more performances only, tonight and tomorrow afternoon at 331 Main Street Bennington, VT. For information and tickets call 802-500-5500.