

A 'Pageant' like no other

Popular musical returns to the Queen City, reveals deeper meaning through campy fun and humor

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

Let's face it: Beauty pageants are a joke. Some would even argue such contests are sexist. They are, perhaps, among humanity's basest forms of "talent" and entertainment. Women from across the country (or world, for those global contests) glam themselves up and try their damndest to mold themselves to some extraordinary, mostly unachievable model of "beauty." A winner's reward? A fab crown and some flowers, maybe some money if you're lucky, a year's worth of "community service" and the lust of millions of strange men you've never met (or would ever want to meet).

Fortunately for us sane folks, we can indulge in "Pageant: The Musical," a hilarious and satirical spoof on this strange, albeit popular, world of beauty pageantry. Actor's Theatre of Charlotte will stage the show in January.

The musical itself has been providing laughter to audiences since its debut in 1991, being performed in cities across the world — most recently in Atlanta. January's rendition of the musical is Charlotte's second staging of "Pageant," which premiered here five years ago. Three of the cast and crew from 2005's performance, including director Stuart Williams, have returned for Actor's Theatre's version.

The story brings together six beauty pageant contestants: Miss Bible Belt, Miss Deep South, Miss Great Plains, Miss Industrial Northeast, Miss Texas and Miss West Coast. Each contestant, however, is played not by a stereotypical beauty queen, but rather by men. It's certainly an easy set-up for humor and campy fun.

Williams, who has performed in the show, three times, admits the musical is campy and that its original intent was to show the



The cast of 'Pageant: The Musical'. Pictured (front l to r): Robbie Jaeger, Billy Ensley and Devin Nystrom. (back l to r): Alex Aguilar, Ryan Deal, Gray Rikard, Matt Kenyon and Clay Smith.

ridiculousness of beauty pageants. Yet, he and other cast members agree the show might have relay other meanings, allowing audience members to take a deeper look into the objectification of women, the divisions communities create among themselves and how people often treat each other when faced with competition and approval.

Getting to that underlying message, however, can be difficult.

Competing for the aptly-named title of "Miss Glamouresse," each of the contestants must prove their "skills" and "talents" in

various rounds including a "Spokesperson" competition, fitness, evening wear and swimsuits and general talent. At the end of the show, a panel of four audience members chosen randomly at the beginning of the show judge the contestants and decide on a winner.

Though the show is completely scripted — including each of six possible endings — Williams says many audience members who've never seen it mistake the musical for a real drag pageant. Despite the inevitable, erroneous perceptions, only one member of this rendition's cast has ever performed

professionally in drag. Clay Smith, known to many as Roxy C. Moorecox, says he's shared some of his "trade secrets" with other cast members. Though their repertoires lack drag performance, each say they're up to the task.

Williams cautions, however, that the show isn't about drag. He says the musical's authors "made it very clear" that having six actors in drag would never produce a successful show.

"You have to pick actors who could make you believe they are women," Williams says. "Any drag performer who is successful can make you believe they are this persona. What's most important is that they not only had to learn the lines and dances and moves but they are actually having to portray women very much along the lines of Tootsie or Miss Doubtfire and be convincible. You can't just throw the clothes on and think that's enough to pull off the show."

Among the show's best qualities, cast members say, is its interactivity and unpredictability. Because the four judges are chosen from the audience each night, the show can end differently every time it's performed.

Actor Devin Nystrom, who plays sassy Miss Deep South, says that built-in flexibility keeps the show fresh. "It never becomes stale for us," he says.

Though the show isn't new and has been performed in Charlotte before, Williams says he expects this performance will go over well. Williams says Actor's Theatre's rendition has been provided better resources, more advertising and publicity and a cast that is "more comfortable in their own skin."

"Pageant: The Musical" opens at Actor's Theatre of Charlotte on Jan. 6 and runs through Jan. 22. Tickets, on sale now, are available by phone, at 704-342-2251 ext. 21 or online at actorstheatrecharlotte.org. ::

The Hole Story

Indie film legend John Cameron Mitchell snags his first Hollywood feature directing gig with Nicole Kidman

by Lawrence Ferber :: **qnotes** contributor

In "Rabbit Hole," a little boy's death tears his parents' lives apart. Actor-turned-filmmaker John Cameron Mitchell ("Shortbus," "Hedwig and the Angry Inch") connected deeply with the material — adapted by David Lindsay-Abaire from his own Pulitzer Prize-winning play — and won over star/producer Nicole Kidman, snagging his first high-profile, Hollywood feature directing gig.

As close to a sure bet for an Oscar nomination as one can get, Kidman delivers a stunning, natural performance opposite an equally strong Aaron Eckhart. While somber in tone, "Rabbit Hole"'s wit-bitten dialogue, smart editing, alternating flashes of humor and explosive emotion and excellent supporting actors — including Sandra Oh, Dianne Wiest and newcomer Miles Teller as the teenager who accidentally caused the child's death — combine to make a memorable, compelling, and entertaining new classic.

Mitchell recently directed a stunning online short film for Dior starring Marion Cotillard and Ian McKellen as a burlesque siren and a wheelchair-bound fan, respectively (he says that more spots will follow). He is also producing graphic novelist Dash Shaw's debut animated feature, which he describes as "a mix between Philip K. Dick and 'The Simpsons.'" Just prior to a "Rabbit Hole" press conference with Kidman and Eckhart at New York's Trump Soho hotel, Mitchell sat down with me for a revealing one-on-one.

When you were a teenager your four-year-old brother died and you witnessed firsthand how that can break up a family, which served as a significant personal connection to "Rabbit Hole." But have you ever experienced a loss or tragedy that tested an adult relationship of yours?

Well, my most serious relationship was with someone who had a drug problem. Over many years it was an off-and-on element because he was in rehab at times. It was too much. It was too much for us. And, it wasn't just the drugs, it was other issues, but it was a very loving relationship and he passed away soon after we broke up. That was six years ago. I lost a brother when I was 14, a very different experience from losing a lover, but



Director John Cameron Mitchell with Actress/Producer Nicole Kidman on the set of "Rabbit Hole."

Photo Credit: JoJo Whilden

[there were] the same symptoms. There's this horrible period right after and guilt, rational or not, usually not, and then

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