

"The Rainmaker" Comes to Westchester Playhouse

By Conrad Hurtt

Fine and dandy! –Snooky
First class, A-number one!
 – Starbuck
Ahhh, I recommend it! –
 Tornado Johnson
You gotta take a chance!
 – Bill Harmony
*Lots of electricity in the air
 tonight!* – Deputy File

Don't miss the Kentwood Players' performance of *The Rainmaker* at the Westchester Playhouse. This is N. Richard Nash's play about a confidence man that comes to a western town for 24 hours, and double deals the townsfolk helpings of hopes and dreams. There is exuberance in this romantic comedy, a giddy glee that extends into the audience. The actors are having so much fun in their roles: it's a musical without the singing, dancing, or music. This is community theatre at its best; never mind the \$14 stipend per night for the equity waiver actor—these actors receive no money. They are on stage for the pure love of giving a performance, and it shows. The actors truly inhabit their characters in seamless portrayals.

Clad all in black, Hollywood-handsome Beau Puckett plays Bill Starbuck (the Rainmaker) with Viggo Mortensen-like wiry intensity.



The entire cast of *The Rainmaker*.

He continually flings his arms and legs into a star-shape with his body, facing front or back to the audience to punctuate his zest for castles and pies in the sky. Unlike the snake-oil salespeople of his time selling cure-all elixirs, the Rainmaker sells rain to the drought-fraught country-folk. Like those faux medicine-hawkers of old he mixes faith and belief into the sale, just when there is a shortage. He knows how to read people; with surgical precision he identifies and then mocks each character's flaw, forcing them to face their own fears and shortcomings. The funny part is (and this production gets a lot of laughs from the audience), the Rainmaker wants what he's selling just as desperately as the suckers that pay him the hundred dollars (the Curry family).

It's an easy scam: wheedle, connive and pry the money out of good, honest folk, using liberal amounts of charm, enthusiasm, and standard sales technique. Twenty-four hours later, after you've eaten their food and slept in their bed, give the hundred dollars back with an apology for no rain. In this fashion the con-artist works his way across the country with free room and board. But his plan nearly falters; at the Curry house this free spirit almost sprouts roots with Lizzie.

Christine Joelle Torreele plays Lizzie, plain and tall, with big teeth and a face as down-home as apple pie. Honest and true, her only value in this small town is defined by

how soon she can lasso a husband. An educated feminist, she scares away potential suitors with her inability to dumb herself down. Men in her town (and the next town over), expect a more docile and uneducated woman, a "silly little jackass." Thanks to Starbuck, this duckling sees the beautiful swan that was always within.

With the S.A.T. scores to match Oz' Scarecrow, Philip Ward plays Lizzie's brother Jim with Gomer Pyle-like comic timing. Temperamental but likeable, his lines usually get a laugh from the audience. Starbuck helps him to mature from naive puppy-dog into savvy independence, and he becomes engaged to be married.

Not only Lizzie and Jim, but every member of the Curry family is changed by the 24 hours they spend with Starbuck. Scot Renfro as Noah softens his hard-line stance and becomes more human, beginning to see shades of gray. Shawn Savage as Deputy File needs mending, and learns to ask for what he needs in a woman. Dan Adams as H.C. goes from easy-going to strict disciplinarian in his defense of daughter Lizzie. The only one to not meet Starbuck is the only one to remain unchanged throughout the play: Jeffrey Culp as the good-natured Sheriff.

The play underscores one of the hazards of small town life, that everybody feels it's their right to butt their nose into their neighbor's business: to help them do better, get ahead, or improve themselves. In the town of Three Point, the Sheriff insists that his Deputy get a dog. H.C. insists that the Deputy marry



Shawn Savage (right), Beau Puckett (standing) and Christine Joelle Torreele as File, Starbuck & Lizzie.

Lizzie. Noah insists that Jim not marry Snooky. Even a complete stranger like Starbuck is comfortable eavesdropping through windows, bursting in on a family's private dinner, and then assuming control over their lives.

Written and produced on Broadway in 1954, *The Rainmaker* was a hit with Darren McGavin and Geraldine Page; it immediately became a successful film with Burt Lancaster and Katherine Hepburn. Director August Virvito has brought 1954 back to the other side of the tracks in the warehouse district of Westchester. The Bonanza set by Tony Pereslete invites us in with lots of wood, peach, and yellow: it's old-fashioned Americana at its most romantic.

THE RAINMAKER, Costumes: Sheridan Cole, Lights: Tom Brophey, Sound: Susan Stangl, 8301 Hindry Avenue, (310) 645-5156. 7/15/05-8/20/05, 8:00-10:30 pm. \$15.00, or \$13.00 students/seniors

Conrad Hurtt is getting a Master's in Theatre from Cal State L.A., and has appeared in 35 plays. He currently teaches acting for the Recreation and Parks Department.