

# from the FOOTLIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 2011

"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays."

<http://www.footlightsdc.org>

## September 26: *The Habit of Art* by Alan Bennett

**Ted van Griethuysen**, one of the greatest actors in this region for the past 30 years, will take us on **Monday, September 26**, through his leading role as one of the great poets of the past century in the upcoming U.S. premier of a play by one of Britain's most honored writers. A "deeply and unexpectedly moving" play was one of the typical remarks by London critics of *The Habit of Art* by **Alan Bennett**, well known in the U.S. for *The History Boys*.

The play "shows two great artists, towards the end of their lives, united in their belief in the power of the creative impulse," another London reviewer wrote. W. H. Auden, the poet, was a mentor in a sense to Benjamin Britten, the composer, in the 1930s. But Britten chafed at Auden's leadership and angrily broke up their friendship just before World War II. Britten, apparently, refused to ever speak again to the older, more prominent Auden.

Playwright Alan Bennett has fashioned a play in which Britten does come to Auden when both are much older and having trouble making words and music do their bidding. This being a play about the creative process, or, at least, just about slogging on because that is what you have been doing all your life, Bennett has made this imagined meeting the center of rehearsals for a play about the imagined meeting. So, creating a play may be like creating a poem or may be like creating an opera. Or, we may hope that there are no similarities because the play being rehearsed is a mash-up of competing actors, producers and playwrights with much intended and unintended humor.

Our guest, Ted van Griethuysen – one of the most articulate and knowledgeable authorities in this area about theater in general – is playing Auden in Studio Theatre's production of *The Habit of Art* now through October 16. [Note: Studio Theatre's excellent postshow discussions are scheduled following matinees on September 18 and October 1.]

Our September 26 dinner-discussion will be at **Alfio's** in Friendship Heights with dinner at 6:30 p.m. and discussion at 7:30 p.m. Make your reservations with Mary Ann Wren at 301-770-4572, or [wjwren@rcn.com](mailto:wjwren@rcn.com).

Alfio's Trattoria is located on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments, 4515 Willard Avenue, in Chevy Chase, MD. The restaurant is two blocks from the red line Friendship Heights Metro station. Street parking is limited but valet parking is free. The cost for dinner is

only \$13 for salad, bread, choice among six entrees, ice cream, and coffee or tea. The price includes tax and tip. We appreciate a \$5 contribution to Footlights. Cash or check; no credit cards. Wine, beer, and cocktails are available from the bar.

We expect a full house for this dinner-discussion, and may need to create a waiting list. If you have to cancel your dinner reservation please let Mary Ann know promptly but no later than **noon on September 26** so someone else can attend. We may need to charge you for your meal if you fail to cancel your reservation. Also, if you find you are delayed en route, please call the restaurant (301-657-9133). You may come for the discussion only if you wish, provided we still have room.

Copies of *The Habit of Art* are readily available online at used and new book sites. You may order from Backstage Books or other local bookstores. You'll enjoy the discussion much more if you have read the play.

## Footlights to Discuss *Parade* on October 17

Is it possible to create a musical out of a murder? Playwright **Alfred Uhry** and director Harold Prince did so in 1998, with *Parade*, which Footlights will discuss on **Monday, October 17**, at Alfio's.

The musical – book by Uhry, music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown – which won two Tony Awards but had only a short Broadway run, dramatizes the story of Leo Frank, a northern Jewish pencil factory manager in Atlanta accused and convicted of killing a Southern white girl, Mary Phagan, who worked in the factory, in 1913. Amid roiling controversy over race, religion, sex, and South vs. North – the play opens with Mary watching the Confederate Memorial Day parade and the main witness against Frank was the black janitor at the plant – plus hysteria whipped up by infamous Southern publisher/politician Tom Watson, Frank is convicted and sentenced to death.

But Frank's wife, from an old Southern Jewish family herself, believes in his innocence and campaigns for him, as the musical dramatizes, and the evidence is thin. In 1915, Georgia's governor, convinced the entire trial was an enormous miscarriage of justice, changed Frank's sentence to life imprisonment, figuring a future governor would investigate further and clear Frank, as the play shows. But an organized mob, led by politicians in Phagan's home town of Marietta, broke into the state prison, overpowered the guards and the warden, grabbed Frank, drove back to Marietta – and lynched him. The

final parade in the play is that of the lynch mob.

The Frank trial led, just a month after his conviction, to creation of the Anti-Defamation League. His lynching foretold and heralded a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. And half of Georgia's 3,000-person Jewish community fled the state.

Ford's Theater and Theater J are co-producing *Parade*, which will run at Ford's September 23-October 30. The theaters say *Parade* shows "a circus of conflicting accounts, false testimony and mishandled evidence in a town reeling with social and racial tension." They call it a "compelling and provocative tale of justice miscarried, revealing a country at odds with its declarations of equality." Uhry especially wanted to tackle the Frank case, he told the Los Angeles Times, because it resonated with him as a Southern Jewish man whose great-uncle owned the fateful pencil factory. Uhry had met Mrs. Frank, who never remarried.

Footlights will discuss *Parade* and the Frank case with distinguished American University history professor **Alan Kraut**. His specialty is the immigrant experience, and particularly the experience of those immigrants – and their descendants – who came to the U.S. from Southern and Eastern Europe between the end of the Civil War and the day the gates slammed shut in the U.S. Professor

Kraut also chairs the historians' advisory committee for the Ellis Island National Memorial, which recently oversaw the renovation and expansion – and improved interpretation of the immigrant experience – at the island's museum.

Our discussion will be at Alfio's. For reservations, contact Phyllis Bodin, at 301-986-1768, or [phylbo@verizon.net](mailto:phylbo@verizon.net).

### **September 18: See Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* at WSC Avant Bard**

Footlights was fortunate to have actress Delia Taylor and director José Carrasquillo speak to us at our August dinner-discussion meeting. José confessed that he found Beckett's *Happy Days* script "impenetrable" upon first reading. Happily he found his way through it. The production at WSC Avant Bard has received excellent reviews.

We will see *Happy Days* on Sunday, September 18, 2 p.m. at the Artisphere, 1101 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia 22209. Footlights tickets are \$15. You may pay at the box office, order online or by phone. Be sure to use the code "Footlights" good for this performance only.

### **About Footlights**

To learn more about Footlights, visit our website: <http://www.footlightsdc.org>.

## **Calendar**

- Sunday, September 18, 2 p.m. performance of *Happy Days* at WSC Avant Bard, Artisphere, 1101 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia 22209. Tickets: \$15 with code "Footlights."
- Monday, September 26, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of *The Habit of Art* with guest Ted van Griethuysen. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave., Chevy Chase, MD, 20815. Reserve with Mary Ann Wren, 301-770-4572 or [wjwren@rcn.com](mailto:wjwren@rcn.com).
- Monday, October 17, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of *Parade*. At Alfio's. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, 301-986-1768, or [phylbo@verizon.net](mailto:phylbo@verizon.net).

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**

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