

from the FOOTLIGHTS

APRIL 2007

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

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Crime and Punishment

Our guest speaker for Tuesday, April 17 is **Blake Robison**, one of the busiest stage directors in Washington. In his second season as Producing Artistic Director, Robison brings a new mission, the "Literary Works Initiative" to Round House Theatre and the Washington's theater scene. That is to build an entire season based on plays adapted from great international classics, like Dostoyevsky's masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*, sometimes called the great psychological mystery that set the stage for the modern crime novel. Why did Raskolnikov commit the senseless act of killing the old woman? Or does his behavior make sense, seem justified? Scholarly articles abound on the questions the novel raises.

In a recent one-on-one interview I had with Robison, he noted that in **Marilyn Campbell's** and **Curt Columbus'** adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*, to distill the 500 page novel down to a 90-minute, 50 page play, is a brilliant feat that doesn't detract from the novel's fundamental questions, like, "Is redemption possible?"

Here are some of the reviews that came out after the Chicago opening of the Campbell and Columbus adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*: "Stunningly lean, taut and emotionally searing...a work of theatre that never feels like a condensation of a seminal 500-page novel, but rather has the swift, sharp impact of a blow from an ax."— Hedy Weiss, *Chicago Sun-Times*. Another: "Only occasionally can the production of a classic make us see the work differently...this adaptation and production remind us how thrilling a classic can be. On Opening night you feel the audience holding its breath throughout the performance. Go: it will leave you breathless, too." – *AISLESAY* Chicago.

In producing new adaptations and translations, Robison wants Round House set apart as the venue for literary classics. "Studio Theatre is known as Washington's Off-Broadway house, Woolly Mammoth for its cutting-edge new plays, just as Signature Theatre is recognized for its musicals," Robison said when I interviewed him. "Now, Round House has a distinct identity." Robison so far has followed through by directing *Camille* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (Helen Hayes Award nominations for Outstanding Direction and Production). He has directed, produced or adapted numerous literary works for the stage, which include Helen Edmondson's *Anna Karenina*, Jay Parini's *The Last Station*, and his own four-actor adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which toured internationally to Avignon, Salzburg, and the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

Presently, Robison is at work with playwright Karen Zacarias, our Footlights guest speaker a year ago in April 2006, for next season's stage adaptation of Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

I am especially looking forward to this discussion of Blake Robison's mission and *Crime and Punishment* that brings new dimension to live stage performance. The philosophical questions that emanate from the 50 pages of script, about existentialism, free will, and behavior seem endless. But what impresses me even more is my memory of the November 2006 review I wrote for DCTheatreReviews.com. On opening night of the Cummins and Scoullar adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's classic *The Little Prince*, the mother and young son sitting next to me "left inspired enough to read the original book." What better way to raise the passion level for reading and play-going than to adapt a long classic novel into an acting tour de force? Here lay the seeds to grow future readers of great novels and Footlights members!

We meet on **Tuesday, April 17, 6:30 p.m.** at **Alfio's** to discuss the play with Round House artistic director Blake Robison, who is directing this production. For dinner discussion reservations, call Mark Gruenberg, 202-898-4825, or e-mail press_associates@yahoo.com. Alfio's is in the Willoughby Apartments, 4515 Willard Ave., Chevy Chase, MD (301-657-9133), two blocks from the Friendship Heights Metro. \$12 includes dinner and tip. Dinner is at 6:30; the discussion begins at 7:30. We will have extra chairs if you want to come for the discussion only. Valet or street parking is available. If you must cancel, let Mark know by noon on April 17, so we have an accurate count of dinner reservations.

Copies of the Campbell and Columbus 90-minute play script *Crime and Punishment* can be purchased or ordered from **Backstage Books**, 202-544-5744 or backstagebooks@aol.com, 545 8th St. SE, Washington D.C. (Eastern Market Blue Line metro stop). If you pick up the script at the store, identify yourself as a Footlights member for 10% discount. Call first to make sure books are in stock.

Footlights will see *Crime and Punishment* at Round House Theatre, 4545 East-West Highway, Bethesda, MD on **Sunday, April 22 at 3 p.m.** Tickets are \$40 and include a post-show discussion. Make check payable to Footlights. Send to Robin Larkin, 5403 Nibud Ct, Rockville, MD 20852.

– Rosalind Lacy MacLennan

Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

"This is a most remarkable and thrilling play," Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* said of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* when it opened in 1967. "In one bound Stoppard is asking to be considered as among the finest English-speaking writers of our stage," the *Times* critic said of Tom Stoppard's first major play.

Forty years and dozens of plays and movie (including *Shakespeare in Love*), television and radio scripts later, Stoppard has an international reputation for writing serious comedy. Many critics call him the most intellectual dramatist of our time. Yet, he didn't go beyond the second year of high school. His play features two clueless almost interchangeable minor characters in the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare, who didn't go beyond high school. Curious.

"Plays are events rather than texts. They're written to happen, not to be read," Tom Stoppard said in an interview in 1979. As usual, we will ignore such directives and with

the help of the distinguished Shakespearean scholar and Stoppard admirer John Andrews understand better the questions we have to ask and the choices we have to make in a confusing time and place. Mr. Andrews was director of academic programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, has edited several of Shakespeare's plays and is now executive director of the Washington chapter of the English Speaking Union. (See calendar below for discussion and performance time and place details.)

– Jerry Stilkind

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Calendar

- Tuesday, April 17, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of *Crime and Punishment* at Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave., Chevy Chase, MD (301-657-9133). Dinner: \$12, includes tax and tip. Suggested donation to Footlights: \$5.
- Sunday, April 22, 3 p.m., performance of *Crime and Punishment* at Round House Theatre Bethesda, 4545 East-West Highway, Bethesda, MD. Tickets are \$40.
- [May play selection discussion and performance dates to be determined.]
- Monday, June 4, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at Alfio's.
- Saturday, June 9, 2 p.m., performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at Studio Theatre. Tickets are \$33.

Dinner-discussion reservations: Reserve with Mark Gruenberg, 202-898-4825 or press_associates@yahoo.com.

Theater tickets: Robin Larkin, 240-669-6300 or robinlarkin@comcast.net. Make check payable to **Footlights**. Send to Robin Larkin, 5403 Nibud Ct, Rockville, MD 20852.

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