

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons • 412 • 644-1100



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Challenging play Memories of 'The Donner Party' lead to its revival

By Cathie Broidenbach
special writer

MENTION OF THE Donner Party sends a shiver down the spine of those who know the chilling story of the California-bound wagon train.

During the winter of 1846, the group became snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Starvation in the frozen wilderness drove members of the party to cannibalism, and this macabre fact unfairly dominates popular legends about the ill-fated group.

What happened to the Donner Party of settlers and why it happened challenges all Americans. The Oakland University Center for the Arts will present the Michigan premiere of Hubert Blau's impressionistic play "The Donner Party" on Friday-Sunday, Feb. 2-4 and 9-11, at Varner Studio Theatre on campus in Rochester Hills. (Tickets are \$8 for adults, \$4 for senior citizens and students, \$3 for OU students. For ticket information call the box office at 370-3013).

Director T. Andrew Aston says, "The presence of cannibalism is there in the play but it's not a main focus. From the point of view of everybody (in the Donner Party), they did what they could to stay alive, and cannibalism was a last, desperate step.

"MORE IMPORTANT is the total impact of being misled by a young guide named Lansford W. Hastings. He'd written a book on a new, shorter route across the mountains, but had never, in fact, taken the trail."

The Donner Party believed in Hastings and in his book. At Fort Bridger they broke off from the established Oregon Trail to follow his new route. Unexamined belief was the mistake that led to tragedy.

Using the motif and music of a square dance, plus folk songs — some traditional music and some composed for the play by cast member Michael Ameloot — the play relates the settlers' high hopes and naive expectations when they set out in laden Conestoga wagons for the promised land of California.

It documents their gritty practicality in the face of hardships on the journey and, most important, shows how misplaced trust in Hastings and simple bad timing in getting over the mountains before snow blocked the passes conspired against the group (29 men, 15 women and 43 children). Only 47 of the original 87 reached California.



JIM RIDER/staff photographer

Michael Ameloot is the Caller in "The Donner Party" by Herbert Blau, which is having its Michigan premiere at Oakland University's Varner Studio Theatre.

The square dance provides more than a musical framework, Aston says. "The alternate left and right and left raise the whole question of how the wagon train's well being hinges on turning left at Fort Bridger."

FOLK INSTRUMENTS from the mid 1800s — concertina, dulcimer and reocorder played by Anne and Bob Burns — accompany the songs and lend an authentic sound to the historical story that challenges the audience to ask, "What would I have done in the circumstances?"

Aston says, "I hope the play causes a level of uncomfortable, that it ignites inquiry." Into the moral question of trust and the need to question authority, "I hope it has an after-burner effect."

Blau's experimental play alludes to historical facts known about the crossing, but he chooses to tell the story by overlapping images (even including some about 20th century mishaps) to create a theatrical collage of impressions. A linear unravelling of the tale would be easier to follow, especially for those not familiar with trials of the journey — Sioux and Palate Indians stealing the oxen, a broken leg, a knife, two banishments and a long, parched trip across the Great Salt Desert.

Speeches in the play often overlap. Several dialogues run simultaneous-

ly and the nine members in the ensemble cast play multiple roles including those of oxen and Indians. Sometimes accents change mid-speech as an actor shifts from a crusty, cantankerous German to an American prairie farmer.

Members of the ensemble company include area residents Mary Kay Geb of Rochester Hills and Sheila Lyle of Rochester. Also in the cast are Michael Ameloot, Donald Martin Anderson, Scott Berry, Catherine Blood, M.J. Hoffman, Betty Monroe, Corey Skaggs, Allen Verschuere and Tracy Wade. The impressionistic telling sacrifices absolute plot clarity for the emotional impact of accumulating impressions that resonate in the mind with the color and poignancy of memories.

"IT STUCK in my mind all these years," Aston says of the first time he saw "The Donner Party" performed in 1962. In Minneapolis after a tiring day, he stumbled upon a midnight production of the play performed by Kraken, a professional theater ensemble. "It was a riveting performance, and the play seemed a fine, honest vehicle, telling the desperate struggles of our forefathers."

More than 20 years later when Aston was looking for a challenging new play, memory of that production sent him in search of the script and its author.

Herbert Blau is renowned as an outspoken critic and writer on American theater, as a scholar who until his recent retirement headed the Center for 20th Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and as first managing director of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

Blau had locked the play away so it could never be produced again because he believes theater can only be alive in the present moment — to record and publish plays for production other times and places negates that essential premise of the present moment.

Aston set out to ask Blau to permit a new production of "The Donner Party" despite Blau's philosophical stand. After several months of inquiry, he finally tracked Blau down on sabbatical in Paris and received reluctant permission to produce the play and a promise to send a script.

The skeleton script arrived with no stage directions whatsoever and with occasional blank spaces noting that lines need to be improvised. Aston welcomed the challenge.

"NEW SHOWS require a significant level of creativity. This one needed an enormous amount of choreography because the script doesn't provide any. There's a different level of creative though process when working on a script that hasn't



Director T. Andrew Aston first saw the powerful drama back in 1962. He never forgot it and recently urged the playwright to let him direct a new production.

already been ferreted out," Aston says.

Part of his creative process involved reading Blau's acclaimed books on theater, "The Impossible Theater," "Manifesto" and "Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point." Blau thinks past experiences continue to haunt and affect the present. He calls those past events and experiences hovering over the present "ghostings." Aston steeped himself not only in Blau's philosophy but also in writings about the Donner Party's crossing documented in the book "Ordeal by Hunger."

Next, Aston set out to stimulate his cast members to think about their own biological heritages, to

help them know their bloodlines and "be present with the past."

He says, "As we listened to them tell stories (about their ancestors), we could ask questions they couldn't answer." One actor knew he was part Indian, but he didn't know what tribe. The exercise sent the cast foraging in old scrapbooks and researching family histories as they got in closer touch with their own bloodlines.

Photos in the Studio Theatre lobby identifying the cast also will take a heritage perspective. Instead of listing the usual performing credits, captions beneath each photo will describe family roots of the player.

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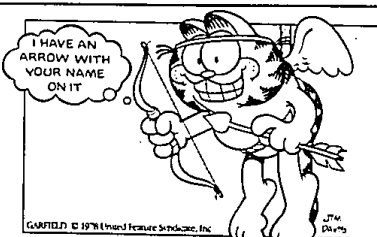
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