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### *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*

Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Review by [Eddie Reynolds](#) | [Season Schedule](#)

In an elegant dress denoting the late nineteenth century, an aristocratic woman steps from behind the curtain and begins to sing in the deeply rich voice of a late-night cabaret performer, "I've been to paradise but I've never been to me." She keeps coming back to this curious refrain before drawing open the small stage curtain to reveal a Victorian-era couch and table. It is about then when she turns her head to reveal a large, red wound with a small, black center on the left side of her head—something on the order of that caused by a bullet.



**Catlin Papp and Juanita Harris**

*Photo Courtesy of Dragon Theatre Productions Company*

In fact, the wound is the self-inflicted conclusion of Henrik Ibsen's most famous play, *Hedda Gabler*, and before us is his well-known heroine of sorts, the woman whose name is the play's title. Thus opens Jeff Whitty's (Tony winning bookwriter of *Avenue Q*) 2006 play, *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*. Now in a wonderfully directed and acted production at Dragon Productions Theatre, this *Hedda* is a hilarious, vaudevillian-like glimpse of the afterlife of fictional characters.

The "paradise" of which the wounded Hedda sings is a purgatory for fictional characters such as she, who keep on living decades and centuries after their authors created them. That is, they live on as long as somewhere in the world they continue to show up on a theatre stage or a movie screen. The price for living on and on is that each character is "doomed" to reenact the scenes as written in an original script, in this case that final scene where Hedda retreats to the piano in an unseen parlor to put a gun to her head. Because a character such as Hedda is always on the stage (or screen) during these scenes, she "never

gets to see me" and is never a part of the audiences that keep her alive by their attendance and applause.

Hedda is not alone in this underworld. Much to her dismay, living with her is her eternally despised husband, George Tesman—a puppy dog of a man who keeps trying to get her to love him as he unsuccessfully keeps hiding the gun that she will eventually find for one more last scene of splashed blood. With her also on this "Cul-de-Sac of the Tragic Women" are others who are condemned to act on their own nature—women like Medea, who keeps murdering her children (noting afterwards, "I feel rotten but so powerful"), and Mammy, who now slavishly serves the needs of Hedda and George when she is not called offstage by some rescreening of *Gone with the Wind* to help Miss Scarlett get into her corset.

As the longest resident in this strange underworld since her creation by Euripides in 431 BCE, Medea explains to Hedda that they reside in this Land of the Fiction, "spend[ing] our days as best we can waiting to be forgotten." Even as they talk, a giddy, young chorus girl named Flossie bounces on the stage looking to be called in front of the curtain for a song, only to collapse in death since her 1927 Broadway show is now totally forgotten. Such legacies evaporate, explains Medea, because they were either "badly written or well written but unlucky."

The one thing that Medea says that really grabs Hedda's attention is about a faraway place called "The Furnace," a place where minds and imaginations create characters like them. Hedda decides it is time for her finally to change her fate of eternal suicides and convinces Mammy to make the journey with her. So off they go, but only after getting directions from a prophesying Cassandra, whom Hedda delights by being the first in history actually to believe her predictions.

Along the way, the two meet a host of fellow "fictionites," providing the audience the silent and fun challenge of naming to ourselves who they are and from what play, musical, book or movie they originate. Annie, Dorothy, Leatherface (of *Chainsaw* fame), and even a line-up of Jesuses (including the original, Mel Gibson's version, and a hippie-trippy *Godspell* one) are just some of the famous that Hedda and Mammy meet as they endeavor to change their forever-as-once-written fates.

Both Caitlin Papp and Juanita Harris are over-the-top superb in their respective roles as Hedda and Mammy. Each begins as the now-stereotyped role that was once penned for her—which makes the "Aunt Jemima" version of Mammy particularly difficult to watch at the beginning, even as Ms. Harris so masterfully recreates the familiar belabored walk, raspy voice, and southern-slave dialect that her prototype on film has. (Ms. Harris also has a couple of chances to sing in such a stirring manner as to make me wish that this play were a full-blown musical.)

Each of the women gains new confidence that change is what she truly wants as she draws closer to the fiery Furnace; and each actress wonderfully transforms in posture, speech and expression the new-found freedom and choice each discovers in herself. But in Jeff Whitty's script, they are also destined to find out just how difficult change can be when habits and expectations of self and others are so firmly set—no matter how much the personal desire to change is felt.

Continuing to show up to try and persuade Hedda to return to the script and their home is the ever-so-sweet husband, George, played with fine Norwegian, upper-middle-class, Victorian flair by Troy Johnson. Janine Evans brings the ancient divas of Medea and Cassandra to full life along with other cameo appearances of the known and forgotten, while Damaris Divito is a series of film and stage names and no-names (like a Latin Lady in Pink who dances around the stage looking for attention). Josiah Frampton is the "real" Jesus among all the other "fake" ones (and he is very funny as such) and also the sad-faced and still angry, ill-fated love of Hedda (Eilert Lövborg) who has not forgiven, even in afterlife, how she burned his manuscript or gave him a gun so he could end it all.

But the biggest laughs (as well as embarrassed groans) go to Tyler Pardini and Daniel Zafer-Joyce who play two *Boys in the Band*, from the 1968 play and later movie whose depictions of gay men are shunned today as stereotypes no one wants to remember. These two are every sashay, lisped "s," and cruel insult to each other that today's gays and straights want to forget. That their play and movie are now rarely seen is a big worry for them (recall what happens to forgotten characters), but they also are fabulously proud to explain to Medea and Mammy (and us) their roles in helping gay liberation finally to occur. Kudos go to both actors for allowing us to laugh and to relish in their performances while also sighing in relief that such stereotypes are now rarely seen on our stages or screens.

Dale Albright has taken the small space of the intimate Dragon and directed a fantastically staged, briskly timed, and totally engaging and enjoyable production. He ensures the script's humor as well as its messages about the trials and trepidations of personal change come through loud and clear via this talented cast. He is fully enabled by a creative team that includes Brooke Jennings, whose diverse costumes (many designed clearly with tongue-in-cheek) recall characters from scripts far and wide. Ryan Lee Short's sound design plays a big part in keeping darkened scene changes exciting by playing dozens of short, spoken clips of famous movie characters from every Hollywood era.

The matinee when I attended this little gem of a play unfortunately had fewer in the audience than were on the stage. The Dale Albright-directed production by Dragon Theatre deserves a packed house each night the rest of its run. This is a first-class, must-see outing that will delight every lover of stage and film as the fictional stars of today and yesteryear parade before us in a wild, wiley, and sometimes totally whacky *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*.

*The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler* continues through November 19, 2017, at Dragon Productions Theatre Company, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA. Tickets are available online at [dragonproductions.net](http://dragonproductions.net) or by calling 650-493-2006.

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