

new leaf



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AS IT IS IN HEAVEN finds new life in Chicago premiere

*New Leaf Theatre presents a Jeff Recommended production
of Arlene Hutton's moving drama*

Currently running until April 9, 2005

Bill Hyland –
Executive Director
Brandon Ray –
Artistic Director
Morgan Leavitt –
Artistic Associate
Tanya Ray –
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Lisa Hyland –
Board President

CHICAGO, IL, February 2005

"Faith and religion are such vital issues in today's world," says Brandon Ray, Artistic Director of New Leaf Theatre and director of their currently running Jeff Recommended production of *As It Is In Heaven* by Arlene Hutton. "I love this script because it deals with these sensitive issues honestly. There's no dogmatic agenda toward any side."

COMPLICATING THE "SIMPLE LIFE"

Arlene Hutton's script concerns nine women who live in a Shaker settlement at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky in the 1830's. The Shakers were a utopian religious sect that flourished in 18th and 19th-century America. "They valued simplicity," Ray said. "They devoted their energy to serving God and their fellow human beings. Everyone who has worked on the production has become intrigued with the Shaker lifestyle. It just seems so clean and full of integrity compared to today's complications."

In the play, the order and simplicity of the Shaker world is turned upside-down when Fanny (played by New Leaf company member Erin Shelton) begins seeing visions of angels. As more of the women have unexplainable spiritual experiences, Eldress Hannah (Deanna Boyd) and the leaders of the community react to preserve order.

"The struggles in this play are timely," Ray continued. "The struggle between opposing belief systems; the struggle between the status-quo establishment and those who want change; the struggle between established religion and direct encounters with a higher power - it all speaks to parallel struggles in the world today."

During the highly collaborative rehearsal process, Ray, the production team, and the actors worked together to make both the everyday world of the Shakers and the spiritual visions come to life. "Our dramaturgical research had us learning Shaker crafts, like knitting and weaving so that they could be constantly working. Then, to bring in abstract elements for the spiritual 'events,' we fashioned a set from sheer fabric, layered in dramatic lighting effects and sound effects using only the voices of the performers. And, as a bonus, beautiful Shaker songs and dances are interspersed through the show."

PLAYING TO THE STRENGTHS OF WOMEN

Besides the quality of the script, there was another factor that drew Ray's attention to *As It Is In Heaven*. "I love the fact that the cast is made up of nine women," Ray said. "We have always had so many wonderful women come to auditions, and we never have enough parts for all of them. So I started looking at plays with large female casts, and this one just leapt out at me."

Among the cast are two of New Leaf's company members, Artistic Associates Erin Shelton and Marsha Harman. Shelton was last seen on the New Leaf stage as Rachel in their production of Craig Lucas's *Reckless*, and Harman appeared as Rosannah in the Jeff Recommended production of Cindy Lou Johnson's *Brilliant Traces* last fall. Rounding out the talented cast are Deanna Boyd, Kim Ford Byrd, Megan Heep, Alyse Kittner, Kyra Lewandowski, Patrycja Mager and Cristin McAlister.

NEW LEAF THEATRE



OUT OF THE ASHES

Being produced for the first time in Chicago, *As It Is In Heaven* had a troubled birth four years ago. The first staging of the play occurred at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2001. Following the Fringe, the plan was to bring the show back to New York for its off-off-Broadway premiere, scheduled to open on September 13th, 2001.

“Though I was very proud of the production,” says playwright Arlene Hutton, “the New York premiere of *As It Is In Heaven* was a personal disaster, both emotionally and financially.” Following the tragic events of September 11th, the cast and company decided to hold to the September 13th opening day because the message of the play was healing. Although houses for the initial production were small, those who saw the play appreciated it. “The audiences who did come welcomed the message of hope of the Shaker songs and commented on the blessing of being transported to another time and place,” said Hutton.

Though being critically well received, *As It Is In Heaven*’s New York production never found an audience in those difficult days. “I was very sad about this play and thought that it would never be seen,” said Hutton. However, a revival by the Los Angeles-based company Actors’ Co-op in 2003 re-sparked interest in the play, garnering “Critic’s Choice” honors in the *LA Times* and *LA Weekly* and extending its run by three months.

And now the play has found new life in Chicago. “I’m thrilled that my work is being presented in Chicago for the first time, since I’m aware of the strong theatre scene and the exceptional talent pool,” Hutton says. “I hear so many good things about the production of *As It Is In Heaven* at New Leaf. I’m proud of what they’ve accomplished with my play.” She’s also grateful that audiences are seeing her show again. “What began as a very sad experience,” says Hutton, “has become an exciting journey, as other theatres discover and take the risk of presenting a play that is about hope and forgiveness.”

New Leaf’s production of *As It Is In Heaven* opened on March 3, 2005, and is currently running Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at 8:00 pm until April 9, 2005. It is being performed at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center, 2045 N. Lincoln Park West, Chicago, IL. Tickets are \$15.00 for general admission, \$12.00 for seniors and students. Special group rates are available. All Thursday night performances are industry nights, tickets for \$5.00 with headshot, resume or business card. Tickets can be reserved by telephone at 877-238-5596 or purchased online with SmartTix at newleaftheatre.org.

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