

new leaf



P.O. Box 30030 Chicago, Illinois, 60630 773-391-9800 newleaf@newleaftheatre.org

As It Is In Heaven by Arlene Hutton
Directed by Brandon Ray

REVIEWS

Pioneer Press Skyline, March 10, 2005

As It Is In Heaven, an engrossing play by Arlene Hutton (the pen name of Beth Lincks), tells the story of disruption caused by a new arrival in the women's compound of a Christian sect commonly known as Shakers. The play, which premiered in 2001 and had a brief off-Broadway run, is now in the capable hands of Chicago's New Leaf Theatre.

The play, which premiered in 2001 and had a brief off-Broadway run, is now in the capable hands of Chicago's New Leaf Theatre. Brandon Ray ably directs a focused nine-member all-woman cast that puts flesh and blood on the now-obscure religious movement. Hutton's drama is set in 1838. The place is rural Pleasant Hill, Ky., one of the locations in America where members of the group – officially, the United Society of Believers in the Second Coming of Christ – resettled after finding themselves at odds with the Church of England.

Removing themselves as much as possible from “the World's people,” the hard-working congregation formed utopian communities in which they strove to integrate their faith into daily life. The Shakers embraced pacifism and eschewed private property; they chose to eat simple foods (seasoned with a light hand), to avoid singing with too much harmony and to lead celibate lives. While men and women shared leadership roles, they generally kept apart from one another.

Adopting the ascetic, no-nonsense lifestyle wasn't easy, but the enclave offered shelter to abused or impoverished women and, working together, offered members a sense of purpose. *As It Is In Heaven* opens with a gathering song and communal confession, in which the women own up to their shortcomings: sleeping late, gossiping and being prideful of a new apron. Another song, with the message “Shake out all that is carnal,” reinforces the group's dedication to the ideals embodied by the late founder, Mother Ann Lee. At the core of their beliefs Shakers held that God was both male and female and that Jesus was the first incarnation of the spirit of Christ on Earth and Mother Ann the second.

When Fanny (Erin Shelton), a newcomer, wanders off to a remote meadow and, wide-eyed and shaking, reports seeing visions of angels she claims were messengers from Mother Ann, senior members of the group charge her with lying. They suspect Fanny of being a “winter Shaker,” one who converts when life gets too hard on the farm in order to reap the benefits of the commune.

But soon others, including the impressionable young Izzy (Alyse Kittner) and the artistic Polly (Cristin McAlister) claim to have received the same spiritual “gift” as Fanny. Tasks are neglected, and the stern elder, Hannah (Deanna Boyd), realizes she has trouble on her hands. “Why,” she asks with skepticism, “would angels speak to you?” She views Fanny's celestial manifestations as a work of pride, arguing that it would most likely be the elders who would see the visions first.

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Brandon Ray –
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In an emotional scene, an envious Hannah pretends to commune with the spirit world in an area she has designated as sacred ground. However, her plan backfires, and she is the only one in the group who fails to see the bright light and heavenly apparitions. A recitation of the Lord's Prayer only raises the question: What exactly is God's will – and who decides? Other characters in the uniformly fine ensemble include Patrycja Mager, Marsha Harman, Megan Heep, Kyra Lewandowski and Kim Ford Byrd.

Loretta Rogganbuck's period costumes and Jared Moore's lighting help set the mood for this engaging production, as does the intimate space at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center. It's too bad that the crowd on Friday night was so sparse. This show merits a bigger audience.

- *Tom Witom*

Gay Chicago Magazine, March 17, 2005

There is much to admire in New Leaf Theatre's uneven production of a religious community abruptly changed forever when a newcomer sees ecstatic visions of angels. Arlene Hutton's script is perhaps the biggest surprise. Who knew that a group of Shaker women could be witty and charming, even downright funny at times?

There is hardly more than the script to work with as set designer Marni Woloszyn leaves a bare stage, giving her actors only light props and movable seating. Very quickly, however, this seems perfectly reasonable, and we are swept along by the story, forgetting the lack of atmosphere. Credit this to a fine cast and some very beautiful choices with fabric and light. Authentic (if a tad simple), handmade costumes by Producer Tanya Ray help us along as well.

Director Brandon Ray shows great wisdom in guiding this piece at a speedy pace, assuring that the women in his adept cast don't milk any moments for more than they're worth. And for the most part, they don't, hardly wasting a second and lifting lovely voices in choral hymns as they move set pieces from scene to scene.

Act one comes to a close with three women of this Pleasant Hill, Kentucky society claiming to have seen the visions. Fanny (Erin Shelton), the newest arrival, is the first to witness this, and soon both Polly (Cristin McAlister), a woman with a "gift" for drawing, and Izzy (an intriguing, innocent Alyse Kittner), a girl of only 17, both join her in going "beyond the meadow" hoping to see the angels again. Rumors abound in the town, and soon the three women come under attack from believers and nonbelievers alike, enduring stones thrown by town boys, and an inquisition from the Shakers.

As the lights come up on act two, however, the show takes an unfortunate turn. Gone is Ray's effective pace as the work takes on an overwrought, overplayed pitch. Several cast members choose to abandon their lighter touch on Hutton's words and fairly beat us with dramatic intent. This is too bad, since the production had such a firm grip on the story until this point. Still, Shelton, McAlister and Kittner all turn in fine performances. Marsha Harman as Betsy, the kindly mediator of the group, is as funny as she is honest. Despite an unappealing second act, the show is still worth a look-see. (Two and a half stars)

- *Emily Lee*

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Chicagocritic.com - March 3, 2005

RECOMMENDED

It is terrific when I can report about something different, something special on stage. New Leaf Theatre, under Brandon Ray's stellar direction, offers just such a jewel. *As It Is In Heaven*, a 2001 work by playwright Arlene Hutton (real name Beth Lincks) is an historical-religious drama about a little-known religious sect, the Shakers and is set in Pleasant Hills, Kentucky in 1838. Hutton sprinkles her work with Shaker sayings, Shaker circle dances complete with rhythm arm movements and rich melodic voices singing Shaker harmonies.

A religious drama amazingly free of dogma, *As It Is In Heaven* tells the story of how one Shaker 'family' (the women live separate from the men as chastity is a prime virtue) deals with change when one of the new women, a non-believer starts to have visions of angels, of Shaker founder Ann Lee (dead since 1784). She hears music, sees bright lights and goes into body shaking trances and speaks in tongues.

The ultraconservative simple, peasant, back-to-the-earth sect is threatened by such things. The Shakers have strict rules for every aspect of living as each must confess their sins and keep no secrets. The play spends time exposing us to the basic simplicity of Shaker life where all the nine women seem to get along and each works hard to make the community living tolerable. Lead by elder woman, Hannah (Deanna Boyd) the group has trouble dealing with the cycle of change as each of the three youngest women realizes their abilities. One has "a gift for drawing," another has a gift for cooking and so on. Hannah enforces the Shaker rules and believes most "gifts" are the work of the devil as she pounds her belief in shared labor and strict religious practices into the girls.

The terrific ensemble features wonderful Shaker rituals such as the circle dances with choreographed steps, arm movements and hand clapping while singing traditional songs. The cast exuded charm, togetherness and a sense of a loving community. We sympathize with Hannah as she struggles to keep order in the idyllic community. Yet we silently cheer for Izzy (Alyse Kittner) as she struggles toward womanhood and we like Fanny (Erin Shelton) as she develops her 'gift' for seeing the angels in her quest for spiritual communication with heaven and founder Ann Lee. Polly (Cristin McAlister) also sees the visions as the three stir up the tranquil commune.

Playwright Hutton and director Brandon Ray nicely present this harmless sect as a sanctuary for woman from abusive husbands and fathers even though their professed practice of chastity dooms the group from longevity. (The Kentucky sect lasted until 1927 and there are only four living Shakers today.)

The nine women deserve kudos for marvelous acting with strong performances from Erin Shelton as Fanny, Deanna Boyd as Hannah and Alyse Kittner as Izzy. With fine period costumes (designed by Loretta Rogganbuck) and a swift pace that engages and holds out interest from the start, *As It Is In Heaven* delivers a charming, eclectic slice of life look at a historical community that exists in the land of religious toleration America. The power of beliefs and the role of suggestion produce either visions of angels or delusional hallucinations? The plays aptly presents these threatening phenomena.

As It Is In Heaven is compelling, innocent and charming. The nine woman offer marvelous performances. New Leaf's production shakes up our beliefs in the human spirit. This gem is intoxicating.

- Tom Williams

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Chicago Reader, October 14, 2004

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

The New Leaf Theatre's elegant quarters in a Chicago Park District building must have presented something of a challenge to scenic designer Marni Woloszyn. It can't have been easy to replicate a spartan cabin deep in the Alaskan wilderness in a room notable for its polished woodwork and floors. Still, the design never detracts from Cindy Lou Johnson's delicately enchanting tale of a reclusive oil rigger and a runaway bride who find shelter together during a literal and spiritual snowstorm. This two-character play has been a storefront staple here for at least a decade, but under Tanya Ray's perceptive direction, Christian Heep and Marsha Harman make the most of the script's stuttering rhythms and pivotal silences to evoke an intimacy steeped in romantic suspense.

- *Mary Shen Barnidge*

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