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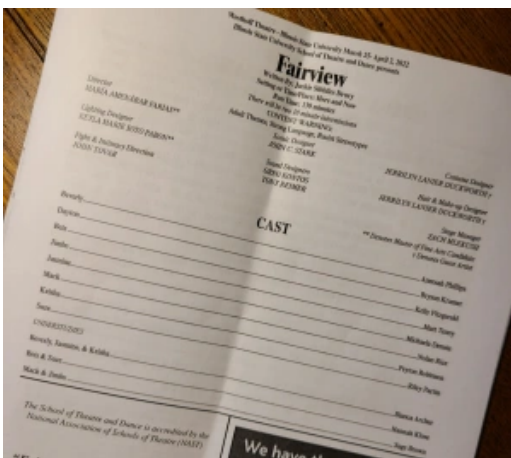
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Two Theatrical Productions: "Fairview" and "Rhinoceros"

Ted Morrissey

The play *Fairview* by Jackie Sibbles Drury has many unusual features, including its timing. Written and produced in 2018, it won the Pulitzer Prize in 2019 and was generating considerable buzz before Covid essentially shut down theaters everywhere, which also silenced the growing commentary on the powerful three-act play. With the return of live theater, director María Amenábar Farias has tried to reignite interest in *Fairview* by staging it via Illinois State University's School of Theatre and Dance.



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The production had a limited run, from March 25 to April 2, 2022, but its talented cast and crew demonstrated why the play had such a profound impact in the Before Time, as well as why it should become a regular piece for acting companies going forward. I attended the April 1 performance in

the university's Westhoff Theatre, which proved an ideal venue with its intimate and experimental construction.

Due to the play's success in 2019, you can find a wealth of articles and reviews online; however, nearly all of them carefully avoid saying much about the action of the play or even its basic premise because the play's power rests in the surprises that the experimental script slowly (at first) doles out to the audience. Or perhaps I should say *dishes out*, since a dinner party provides the plot's undergirding, and food is an important element in the play from start to finish. In fact, the first of the three acts presents a play that seems quite conventional, as we are introduced to Beverly, who is hosting the party for her mother. Beverly is a key figure throughout the play, and she is played to perfection by Aneesha Phillips, who is the singular focus for several minutes as the action begins. Her wonderful performance (mainly comic in the beginning) proves a harbinger of all the talent and creativity that are to come.

As far as the plot goes, I will follow others' lead and say no more (the curious will have no trouble unearthing details online). Instead I will turn to Farias's Director's Note: "The play you are about to see is a fairly new play about the BIPOC experience in America and the history of blackness both in and out of the theatre. . . . We all know the famous saying 'art imitates life.' Well, this is exactly what *Fairview* does. One might even say that *Fairview* is a play in which art exposes life."

As mentioned earlier, there is a distinct comic thread running through the play that functions as a kind of pedestal on which rests the extremely serious issues that are the soul of *Fairview*, a title which suggests location but has more to do with seeing *fairly*, that is, *honestly*; moreover, Drury is also alluding to *fair* being a synonym for light-colored and representative of whiteness. Like the play itself, the diminutive title bursts with various and varied meanings. The audience is tasked with sorting through and reflecting on all that the three fast-paced acts have to say.

The theater where I saw the play had the advantage of intimacy, but with that came limitations in terms of staging options. Nevertheless, Farias's dynamic direction made the most of the venue, using every square inch of theatrical space and providing a robust viewing experience for the audience. That is, the play seemed larger and grander than what the environment might have suggested upon first entering the theater.

There wasn't a weak performance among the players, and all the roles were demanding, both physically and emotionally. There were only eight actors in the cast, but it seemed like more at the time. Together they created a potent synergy. Dance was a significant element in the play's action, and the choreography worked especially well.

I've already acknowledged Phillips's performance. Other standouts included Michaela Dennis, whose "Jasmine" (Beverly's sister) was a dominant presence when she entered the stage; Bryson Kramer as "Dayton" (Beverly's husband), who artfully provided much of the play's comedy, not to mention its physical energy; and Peyton Robinson as "Keisha" (Beverly and Dayton's daughter), who bears more and more dramatic weight as the play progresses—any lasting effects from the play fall to her talents, and she doesn't disappoint.

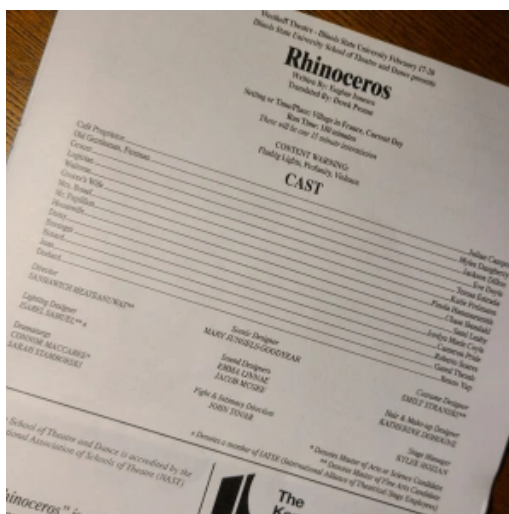
Kelly Fitzgerald (Bets) and Riley Partin (Suze) oftentimes must act as a duo to achieve their parts' full effect, and they work in perfect artistic harmony, providing some of the play's biggest laughs and most profound commentary. Stage manager Zach Mlekush is brought into the action of the play more than is typical for a stage manager, and his coordination of the play's many moving parts is to be commended as well.

Finally, *Fairview* benefited from its Guest Artist, Jerrilyn Lanier Duckworth, who designed hair and makeup. As the program says, "[She] is the creative brains behind **Bridging the Gap: A Look into African American Hair & Makeup for Theatre** < <https://bridgingthegapintheatre.com/> ." Duckworth has given more than 200 workshops, reaching more than 1,500 participants.

If *Fairview* has an equally successful second life, post-Pandemic lockdown, it will be in part because of talented directors like María Amenábar Farias and multitalented actors who can bring the multilayered play to life, leaving audiences to contemplate some of the most serious issues in our society.



In February I attended the School of Theatre and Dance's production of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, directed by Sanhawich Meateanuwat. At the time I was unable to write a review (a combination of particular busyness and bad weather). It certainly wasn't due to any shortcomings in the production. Far from it: Meateanuwat was true to Ionesco's 1959 absurdist script while managing to creatively update it for a twenty-first-century audience.



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The three-act play is set in a provincial French village where, of all things, a rhinoceros on the loose creates havoc. Soon a disease called "rhinocerotitis" begins turning villagers into rhinos. The play's main character is Berenger (played impressively by Cameron Pride), who at first ignores the growing threat posed by the new rhinos, before making an effort to resist their authoritarian inclinations. His change of behavior is largely due to his interest in Daisy (Jordyn Marie Coyle).

Like *Fairview*, *Rhinoceros* was staged in the small, experimental setting of Westhoff Theatre, which Meateanuwat used to its fullest effect, including an elevated level where much of the action takes

place. On the one hand, the production resembles its original time and place, including the set pieces and costumes; but the young director modernized the play through the use of laptops and cellphones, adding new absurd elements to Ionesco's original absurdist vision.

I have seen other work by Meateanuwat, both as director and playwright, and I admire his willingness and ability to experiment with classic material, finding ways to merge his own unique vision with the originals' core themes. Of *Rhinoceros* he writes, "This play challenges the idea of conformity and invites us to think about the way our beliefs shape choices in our lives and define who we are today. . . . Sixty-three years after Ionesco wrote this play, rereading it in the middle of the pandemic is surprisingly impactful. . . . The absurd situation in the story seems familiar. We have all just been through an 'absurd' situation like Ionesco depicts."

And the director identifies what he sees as one of the work's most important lessons: "[I]nformation flies all over the place, and media are right at your fingertips. This play reminds us that it is essential to review and choose carefully which perspectives to consume or believe."

Indeed, between the time of the staging of *Rhinoceros* and the staging of *Fairview*, mask mandates due to Covid were lifted, implying the pandemic may be nearly over. But is it really? Covid statistics don't obviously and easily lead to that conclusion. The January 6 Committee continues to do its work investigating that fateful day, while half the country seems to doubt whether the attack on the Capitol happened at all. Social media sites infect followers with some form of rhinocertitis every minute of every day.

Besides Pride and Coyle, other noteworthy performers included Gared Thrush as "Jean" (the first to transform into a rhino, before our eyes in fact), Finola Hammersmith as "Mrs. Bouef" (who is worried about her husband's illness), and Roberto Soares as "Botard" (an outspoken sceptic when it comes to rhinocertitis).

All in all, it was an enjoyable performance about a thought-provoking, up-to-the-minute phenomenon. Once again, Meateanuwat proves that older scripts can speak to us just as powerfully in the twenty-first century as they did when originally staged.



Ted Morrissey < <https://tedmorrissey.com/> > is the publisher of Twelve Winters Press and its entities. His novel excerpts, short stories, poems, critical articles, reviews, and translations have appeared in some 100 publications. His most recent novels are *The Artist Spoke*, *Mrs Saville*, and *Crowsong for the Stricken*.

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