

Taking a Chance on Theater

By Tom Provenzano

LAST MARCH, Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle bestowed its signature Polly Warfield Award upon the Chance Theater, adding to a quickly mounting quantity of accolades received by this young and vibrant theatre company, housed in Orange County. Because the theatre is outside Los Angeles County, it is not eligible for Equity's 99-seat concessions. But Oanh Nguyen, one of four founding members and the company's artistic director, sees that as a plus. He explains, "It has forced us to grow our organization the right way."

The company has ambitions that far exceed the concepts of Equity's plan. Nguyen says, "Our mission is to have a theatre that can truly sustain and maintain a company of actors, designers and artists. We are in the midst of three major goals. We have a small paid staff and a 49-seat house with a budget of \$300,000. We're seeking a development director and to begin Equity contracts next year. We're also looking for a new space—we hope to ultimately run two theatres: a 200-seat and 99-seat.

DOUG CATTILLER



Lowe Taylor and Bob Simpson in *Sunday*

Even in its small theatre, the company boasts nine years of activity, including fresh stagings of revivals and bold exploration of new plays. Nguyen's current theatrical aspiration is a rethinking of the Sondheim classic *Sunday in the Park with George*. This exploration of art and human choices was created for a very large canvas, based on painter Georges Seurat's masterpiece *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*. So Nguyen's task is to translate that enormity to his tiny theatre.

The challenge excites him, as he explains, "We've reinvisioned it for our space. We've completely restaged the show. I love this play; there are so many beautiful ideas and themes and images but I have always felt the narrative was hard to grab hold of. I suspect originally the idea was to tell the story of the painting but at some point it must have changed to focus on the story of George and his lover Dot. We have been



ERIKA C. MILLER

Directors Patricia Ansuini and Oanh Nguyen

working to honor both stories."

Nguyen's exhilaration is not limited to his own directing but extends to everything the Chance attempts. Also upcoming is the Orange County premiere of Joe Calarco's adaptation of Shakespeare's *R & J*. The story follows four boys in an oppressive academy where *Romeo and Juliet* is a banned text. A purloined copy of the play falls into their hands and they perform a secret staging that changes their lives forever.

Guest director Patricia Ansuini is thrilled to be working with the company and is ecstatic about the script. "Calarco has found a way to do same gender Shakespeare without it being a museum piece. I really was struck by the idea that it told two stories at once. The whole thing is predicated on the idea these boys are in a repressive situation where everything that reaches them is prescriptive—power is exorcized over what they see, what they read, what they say, what they hear. In this case it's a Catholic school but I am very vigilant about not making it a religion bashing show. It is just the idea art sets these boys free."

The intensity of both directors bodes well for the Chance's goal to be a beacon of quality theatre. With continued drive and imagination the company may well reach its dreamed-of destination: standing alongside South Coast Repertory and the Laguna Playhouse to offer Orange County extraordinary theatrical experiences. ■

In repertory: SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

Plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm

SHAKESPEARE'S R & J

Plays Sat., 4 pm; Sun., 6 pm;
through Sept. 16
Tickets: \$22-\$25
The Chance Theater
5552 E. La Palma Ave.,
Anaheim
714.777.3033 or
www.chancetheater.com