

Thankful for reflection

Barbara Adams

ITHACA, NY -- It's Native American History Month, and everyone's favorite friendly holiday, Thanksgiving, approaches — surely someone can make some hay with that combination. And Larissa FastHorse absolutely did, in her satiric, laugh-out-loud comedy now playing at the Kitchen Theatre.

FastHorse, a member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, is a 2020 MacArthur Fellow, an award-winning writer/choreographer, and the co-founder of Indigenous Direction, the nation's leading consulting company for Indigenous arts and audiences. With immense tolerance and a generous sense of humor, she works to correct the ignorance and fictions about indigenous people of North America.

The plot of “The Thanksgiving Play” — unsurprisingly among the top 10 plays being produced this season — is, in the words of actor Matthew Boston, “a group of very well-intentioned teaching artists tripping all over themselves with white wokeness in order to put on an unobjectionable Thanksgiving elementary school play.”

In her 15th year of directing here, Kitchen favorite Margaret Perry manages this play with relish and consummate comic skill. Four expressive Equity actors gleefully take FastHorse's challenge: getting us to see ourselves clearly, laugh at our mistakes, and know we can do better.

Can an all-white troupe present an ethnically sensitive play about Native Americans, much less about Thanksgiving? Just wait and see. Logan (Ginna Hoben) is anxiously directing, her school teaching career on the line because of the uproar about her previous show. She's collaborating with her street-actor colleague (and main smooch), Jaxton (Alex Curtis).

Her team is boosted by a local middle school teacher and history buff, Caden (Matthew Boston). But Logan's real coup is hiring one genuine professional with her grant money: a genuine Native American actress from Los Angeles. Only, as she discovers early on in rehearsals, Alicia (Maggie Lou Rader) is very white (with just a hint of Spanish); she merely “acts” different ethnicities.

Baron E. Pugh's schoolroom set (amply lit by Jennifer Fok) is serviceably simple, with kids' cubbies and a huge blackboard that doubles as a video screen. That screen is what welcomes us before the show starts: we watch a series of video clips live on the web featuring actual Thanksgiving songs for children. Nothing like reality to skewer reality:

many of these videos are cringeworthy.

Lulled by familiar tunes like “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” and “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” children are expected to mindlessly sing about counting turkeys, with a good dose of bizarre native lore thrown in (one little Indian hanged himself?). The surreal nature of these cheerfully racist songs will have you scrambling to the Internet after the show to find them yourself.

The narrative scenes of the actors rehearsing are interspersed with song and dance numbers where they embody the instructional videos -- the most irresistible being a rousing chorus of four fat turkeys (costumer Lisa Boquist has great fun outfitting the characters). Even the group’s rehearsals offer a chance for mayhem, as Logan is keen on shaping the show collaboratively, having the team improvise various scenarios. This too derails when Jaxton and Caden go full-on into battle against the natives, complete with bowling bloody heads.

The more the foursome diligently tries for enlightened, progressive, politically correct theatre, the worse the outcome. Their earnest efforts echo -- and thus parody -- those well-meaning conversations you hear every day. A long debate ensues about whether as an all-white cast they can represent indigenous people, and they ultimately decide the only honest path is to simply exclude the natives from the celebration altogether. The transgression of appropriation efficiently resolved!

Each character has endearing traits, which the actors brilliantly feature: Logan is neurotic and fretful, “too smart to be content”; Jaxton maddingly centered (he retreats into yoga poses, like headstands). He’s also the most excessively, cloyingly New Male, despite some chafing -- “I went by the pronoun “they” for a whole year!” he wails. Alicia, whose only ambition is to act, not learn, is avowedly simple and thus the only happy one, satisfied just to stare at the ceiling. And poor Caden -- a closet playwright who comes prepared with multiple scripts he’s authored, he craves nothing more than to hear his words spoken by Real Actors.

Caden wants authentic history to be acknowledged, telling the others about native-and-colonist feasts that preceded the New England one (Texas, really!). But art can’t be constrained by facts, and theatre (which is spoofed as much as everything else here) is, after all, about radical re-imagining. For white folks, Logan’s conclusion -- alluding to directing, controlling, dominating -- is nevertheless fairly politically apt: “We need to be less.”

“The Thanksgiving Play,” by Larissa FastHorse, directed by Margaret Perry. Starring Ginna Hoben, Matthew Boston, Maggie Lou Rader, and Alex Curtis. At the Kitchen Theatre, 417 W. State/MLK, Jr. St., Ithaca. Wednesday-Sunday, through Nov. 21. Tickets at 607-272.0570.

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