

Travel Tips for the Adventurous Theatergoer

The Menorah has been extinguished, the tree has been taken away (except for the needles imbedded in the carpet), the hams and geese have been consumed, waistlines have been expanded, and the 2008-resolution exercise machine has become a clothes rack. In short, the holiday season is over and it is time to start thinking about high school spring musicals and theater excursions of all types.

The kids get it going in these coming months with their annual spring rite in celebration of all things Broadway. Check www.springhsmusicals.com to find a comprehensive collection of titles, dates, times, and inside information on the musicals in your area.

As to theater excursions, spring and summer are the best times to set sail for stages around the area, but Broadway, off-Broadway, and London are always teeming with top-notch shows featuring recognizable talent. However, don't be fooled into believing that only those lofty venues, especially New York, can provide the type of acting, singing, and dancing that do these shows justice. A lot of Broadway casting these days is done on the basis of name recognition. The fact is that the main advantage of shows on the

Great White Way or in the West End is the intimacy of the performance space. These smaller theaters would be impractical for touring shows that usually play in cavernous local venues for maximum attendance over a limited run. In New York, long-running favorite musicals like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Wicked*, and *The Lion King* are still going strong. Newer musical fare includes *The Little Mermaid* (has musical theater gone completely Mickey Mouse?), *Mary Poppins* (I guess it has), and Mel Brooks's poorly reviewed stage version of his movie *Young Frankenstein*.

For those who don't necessarily need song and dance with their stage experience, some good New York bets are: the new production of the William Inge classic tragedy *Come Back Little Sheba* starring *Law and Order's* S. Epatha Merkerson; the recent London import *The Seafarer*, about a group of sodden ne'er-do-wells; and *August: Osage County*, which examines the members of a seriously dysfunctional Oklahoma family and their struggles to maintain sanity among the chaos.

For a more serene theater experience, a good bet is The Shaw (as in playwright George Bernard) Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. This quaint rural area can be found just thirty or so minutes from the neon circus atmosphere of Niagara Falls and features old-time Bed and Breakfast accommodations and charming little shops (for those who care about those trivialities when there is theater to be seen). There are also several wineries in the region catering to the sophisticated palate and run-of-the-mill wine-drinker alike. This year's line-up includes familiar titles like *Wonderful Town* and *A Little Night Music*, but it is usually the lesser-known, rarely staged plays of Shaw and his contemporaries that make the festival worth the approximately four-and-a-half-hour trip from the Pittsburgh area. Dozens of dinner/lodging/theater packages are available for the Festival season, which starts this year on April 1 and continues through early November. Check it out at www.shawfest.com.

If you are only looking for a day trip to the theater, think about West Virginia Public Theatre on the WVU campus in Morgantown. Just a little over an hour away from most South Hills communities, WVPT offers five musicals and one play during their whirlwind six-week season, and production quality is always of the highest caliber. This year the season starts on June 24 and includes—in order—recent film hit *Dream Girls*, fifties boy group revue *Forever Plaid*, Shakespearean update *West Side Story*, the gut-wrenching drama of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, recent Broadway flop *Urban Cowboy* (based on the John Travolta movie), and Mel Brooks's zany and profane *The Producers*. Several getaway packages are available and can be perused at www.wvpublictheatre.org.

Next time, we will be taking a look at some of the area's Summer Theater options. □



Some of the productions scheduled for the coming season at West Virginia Public Theatre in Morgantown.

An advertisement for Greco's Gourmet Catering. The background is a photograph of a display case filled with various meats, including a large ham on a rotisserie, and vegetables like corn and mushrooms. The text 'What's in your fridge?' is overlaid in white. At the bottom, the logo for 'Bella Sera A UNIQUE VENUE' and 'Greco's Gourmet Catering EST. 1999' is displayed, along with the phone number 724.745.5575 and the website www.grecosgourmet.com.