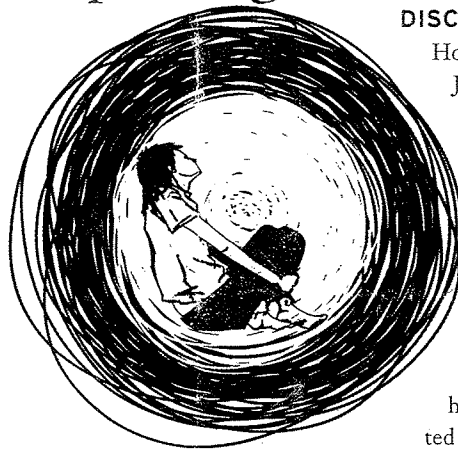


■ NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Capturing 'CASTLE'



DISCERNING COGNOSCENTI LIKE A.M.

Homes and Joyce Carol Oates regard Shirley Jackson's 1962 short novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as something of a cult classic. Oates, in particular, extols this sulkily seductive New England tall tale—about two reclusive sisters whose fierce devotion to each other turns out to be too extreme—as a “masterpiece of Gothic suspense.”

Eighteen-year-old Merricat Blackwood lives at the isolated edges of a village with her elder sister Constance, who was acquitted of a terrible crime six years ago, and their

ailing uncle Julian. Constance tends the garden, while Merricat concocts magical charms to protect the Blackwoods from the townspeople's accusatory eyes and nasty gossip. The façade of dysfunctional small-town sameness is broken when a long-absent cousin, Charles, comes to visit.

The musical version of *Castle*—with music by Todd Almond, a book by Adam Bock and direction by Anne Kauffman—premieres this month at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Conn. Jackson's wicked fairy tale, says composer Almond (*Girlfriend* at Berkeley Repertory Theatre and *On the Levee* at Lincoln Center Theater), is a bizarre love triangle—“in some ways, emotionally, a classic triangle, but with unexpected points.”

Bock says that he, Almond and Kauffman have endeavored to sustain the book's psychological horror-story essence. “It's a wonderfully amoral story,” Bock remarks. “It has a beautiful mix of optimism and pessimism.” The Blackwood sisters live in “a bizarre fantasy,” he adds. “They just want to be alone with the person they like—each other. This is not an uncommon way of thinking when you are a precocious young girl.”

Both Almond and Bock hope this Yale Rep-commissioned musical shines a fresh spotlight on Shirley Jackson. Says Bock, “She's somewhat forgotten in the American canon. But when people read her work, they exclaim, ‘Who is this? She's amazing.’ Jackson was known as a dark Erma Bombeck. She wrote about kids in a hysterical but tilted and truthful way. She doesn't throw in sentiment to make her stories more palatable.” Purposefully free of moralizing curlicues, the new musical version of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* aims to sing cunningly of sugar and spice and things not so nice. —Randy Gener

130 YEARS AGO (1880)

English's Hotel and Opera House in Indianapolis opens with a production of *Hamlet* starring Lawrence Barrett. The 2,000-seat theatre is the most lavish in town, but six years later it will be leased by a competing theatre, George Dickson's Grand Opera House. Under new management, the theatre will eventually become part of a monopolizing producing conglomerate, the Theatrical Syndicate.

75 YEARS AGO (1935)

George Gershwin finishes writing the score to *Porgy and Bess*. The show, Gershwin's masterpiece, will become known as one of the best American operas ever written. It will move from Boston's Alvin Theatre to Broadway the following month and will run for 124 performances.

60 YEARS AGO (1950)

Actress and writer Anna Deavere Smith is born in Baltimore, Md., as the youngest of five. Her father is a coffee merchant and her mother is an elementary school principal. Smith will go on to win back-to-back Drama Desk Awards for her one-woman shows *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*.

20 YEARS AGO (1990)

Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* closes at the Plymouth Theatre after two years of performances on and Off Broadway, having won the 1989 Pulitzer Prize. The play chronicles the triumphs, frustrations and failures of middle-class women of the 1960s through the 1980s.

■ PHILADELPHIA

GRAVE EXPRESSION

WHERE DO A WRITER'S

words come from? “I do not write at all; I type,” asserts Myra Babbage, a secretary to the fictional late novelist Franklin Woolsey, in Michael Hollinger's newest play, *Ghost-Writer*. The play, which premieres Sept. 9–Oct. 31 at the Arden Theatre Company in Philadelphia under James J. Christy's direction, is Hollinger's first since his oft-produced hit, *Opus*, which debuted at the Arden in 2006.

The incomprehensible nature of artistic creation is the centerpiece of his new work, set in 1919, which follows Myra as she



bafflingly continues to turn in transcribed chapters of Mr. Woolsey's book, despite his death six months ago and to the vexation of Mr. Woolsey's widow.

While Myra's artistic inspiration is seriously questioned, Hollinger admits: “I've never really looked closely at my own moments of inspiration—

perhaps because, unlike the more laborious aspects of writing and revision, these are momentary, fleeting, mysterious and ultimately inexplicable.”

Nevertheless, something sparked

Hollinger when he heard a story about Theodora Bosanquet, the secretary to Henry James, who, like Myra, claimed to have received dictation from James after his death. The playwright began contemplating “the intimacy inherent in spending one's workday in the company of an artist in the act of creation, attending in silence until the words begin flowing.”

And while the source of Myra's flow is an utter mystery, Hollinger views her defense of her work as a direct challenge to the audience: “Do you have the necessary patience and sensitivity to stay open to the possibility of something extraordinary happening, here, tonight, in this very room?” —Lauren Rosenfield