



## Critical Evaluation



# Chicago Stage Style

January 2011 Review by Joe Stead

## Leaving Iowa

Dad insists he is not lost, just a little out of the way. If you've ever taken a family road trip vacation, you will probably understand the feeling. Indeed, "Leaving Iowa" strikes many familiar chords in its tour of the American heartland that makes for a surprisingly substantial and eminently enjoyable two hour trip. In case you missed either of the previous Chicago productions of this heart touching comedy - and even if you didn't - you will want to make the pilgrimage out to Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles for this four star winner. You may remember the same space as the long-time Pheasant Run Dinner Theatre and for much of the past decade as the home of Noble Fool Theatricals. Beginning with this show, the theatre operation is now known as Fox Valley Repertory, and if this first production under the new emblem is an indication, there is some magic to be found in our Chicagoland provinces.



Playwrights Tim Clue and Spike Manton have spun their little road trip adventure from pure gold. The all American family at the heart of "Leaving Iowa" is a far cry from National Lampoon's Griswald clan, although every bit as funny and endearing. "Leaving Iowa" is part memory play and memoir of those fondly recalled days when mom and dad would pack the kids up in the family jalopy and head out on the highway for exciting destinations...like Ghost Caverns and the exact center of America. The destination is always put to a family vote ("Elections in Cuba are less predictable," we are told). The Wisconsin Dells are too predictable and overpriced and Las Vegas is too expensive to thrifty old dad, but never fear, dad has an alternative. And what could be more American than Mark Twain's birthplace of Hannibal, Missouri?

Dad has that inherent knack every year for finding the most obscure and least interesting parts of history and geography possible. As our grown narrator Don recalls, his father lived life by an implacable set of rules shellacked to the refrigerator. "You gave us everything and you asked for nothing". You probably know the kind of person, a man who taught history, coached baseball and quietly changed lives for 40 years. As the through line of our "adventure" juts back and forth from past to present, we find Don, now a big city news columnist living in Boston, returning to home sweet Winterset, Iowa (home of the Duke himself, John Wayne). Dad actually passed away three years ago and his cremated remains have been resting unceremoniously in an urn on top of a fuse box.

Since Don had missed both his father's retirement party and funeral, he feels obliged to grant dad's one final wish - for his earthly remains to be scattered on his boyhood homeland. About a two hour drive later, Don discovers that the old yellow house has been replaced by a grocery store, and it somehow doesn't feel right to leave dad in aisle four along with the kitty litter. Fulfilling his father's one and only final request proves to be an adventure in itself. As all the petty bickering and childish whining gets replayed, so does Don's guilt at never being able to tell his father how he truly felt. "None of us are any good at saying what we feel, after all we are from Iowa," Don cracks.

Watching this testament to family bonding will likely bring a smile of recognition and may even leave you wanting to call up a family member or loved one. Life certainly is precious, and it's often the little things that amount to a lot. Director Rachel Rockwell understands this, and without resorting to cheap sentimentality, her warm-hearted production is full of telling details that certainly do add up to a lot. The cast is superb and about as true to life as you can get on a stage. Veteran actor Don Forston is a jovial and hearty Dad, who still manages to unfurl his anger at semi's slow moving RV's with "Carmina Burana" like fervor. Diane Dorsey is a sweet little spitfire as his faithful helpmate, while the very likable Alex Goodrich and the pouty, irksome Katherine Banks trade back seat jabs and sibling rivalry with energetic abandon.

Sean Patrick Fawcett and Valerie Glowinski come close to stealing the show with their chameleon versatility, comic timing and telling details in assorted supporting character roles. Video designer Mike



Tutaj provides the perfect backgrounds against Kevin Depinet's nicely minimalist setting. As Dad promises, "This year we are going to have fun," which Don refers to as "The family vacation F word". There is plenty of fun and adventure to be had in "Leaving Iowa," and audiences in the Chicagoland suburbs won't even have to leave Illinois to enjoy it. You betcha!

## About Joe Stead



Joe Stead has enjoyed a lifelong passion for the theatre, which has involved acting, directing, producing, designing and reviewing since 1984. He served as founder, producer and Artistic Director of Curtain Up Productions in Baltimore, Maryland and Four Star Players in Tampa, Florida. Favorite productions have included "Life With Father," "Deathtrap," "The Odd Couple," "The Miracle Worker," "Brighton Beach Memoirs," "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown" and "Godspell". He has also performed leading roles in "Fiddler on the Roof," "Pippin," "The Phantom of the Opera," "The Front Page," and most recently as Hucklebee in "The Fantasticks" for Waukegan Community Players. Joe holds a degree in Commercial Art from Tampa Technical Institute. As a critic, he has reviewed everything from Broadway to community theatre and major regional theatres throughout the United States including the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey, Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut, and the Asolo Theatre in Sarasota, Florida.



Since 1998, he has been a proud resident of Chicago, the greatest theatre city in America. He served for two years as Theatre Editor for College News and Central Newspapers. He created the website Steadstyle Chicago in 2000 to showcase the city's outstanding and diverse theatre scene. Joe was proud to serve alongside a distinguished panel of theatre professionals as a judge for two seasons of Speaking Ring Theatre's "Vitality" Festival of original short plays. His most fulfilling role, in addition to reviewer and all-around theatre fanatic, was as director of the 2007 production of Peter Shaffer's "Equus" at Actors Workshop (now Redtwist) Theatre, which was nominated for five Joseph Jefferson Award Citations and won for Best Actor (Peter Oylo).