

2008-2009 Season Preview: Herringbone

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It may still be summertime, but here at McCarter we're already gearing up for the season. For us Marketing folk, that means printing brochures, taking reservations from advertisers, and getting ready to promote the fall shows of 2008-2009.

Our season opens with *Herringbone*, a one-man, multi-character musical with a book by Tom Cone, music by Skip Kennon, and lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh. The aforementioned "one man" is the marvelously talented BD Wong, whom you might know from eight seasons on *Law & Order: SVU*. Or from his award-winning turn in *M. Butterfly*. Or the Broadway revivals of *Pacific Overtures* and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Or HBO's *Oz*. You get the idea.

Directing *Herringbone* is Roger Rees, who's no slouch himself. As a director, he has worked for HBO, Roundabout, and Playwrights Horizons. He was also artistic director of the Williamstown Theatre Festival from 2005–2007, where he directed BD in *Herringbone* last summer. Also an actor, he won Tony and Olivier Awards for his performance in *Nicholas Nickleby* and has recurred on a few television series you may have heard of, little shows with names like *Cheers*, *The West Wing*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Everyone on McCarter's staff is excited about this show, especially with such an accomplished pedigree. However, we were having a bit of trouble figuring out the best way to sum it up for audiences. Since *Herringbone* is not only a musical but also a one-man show, reading the script can't truly convey the tone or style of the piece. Then there's the fantastically wild and imaginative plot: a cane-twirling performer tells, with razzle-dazzle virtuosity, the story of a Depression-era 8-year-old boy who becomes possessed by the spirit of a roguish, tap-dancing, vaudevillian dwarf.

You might see how this could pose a challenge.

Luckily for us, BD Wong and Roger Rees graciously agreed to come out to Princeton and read/sing through the script for the McCarter staff, joined by the show's pianist/musical director, Dan Lipton. One of my favorite parts of the reading was the sense of humor of the three collaborators and the enthusiasm they clearly have for this piece. Here's an example:

It stands to reason that dance numbers would be a large component of a musical about a tap dancer. However, since this was just a reading: no dancing. So, to help us imagine when a dance break would occur, BD explained that he would hold up

an index card on which he'd written WONDERFUL DANCING. It got a laugh every time, especially in Act II, when he held up the card, then flipped it over to reveal the words: EVEN BETTER THAN BEFORE.

For just under two hours, we watched as BD Wong morphed into 11 different characters, all without ever leaving the swivel stool on which he sat. Through his voice and facial expressions, he became a coy entertainer, who in turn became an opportunistic father, a lonely hotel receptionist, an eager-to-please child. I can only imagine how powerful the piece will be when lighting, costumes, and choreography are added to the mix.

Finally, we have a clear idea of *Herringbone*. It is quirky, spooky, funny, heartbreaking. It's about possession and exploitation, the confusing search for identity and the destructive, intoxicating allure of show business.

I can't wait.