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For Immediate Release:



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Opening in March “The Rear Column” Searing Drama about H.M. Stanley’s ill-fated 1887 expedition to the Congo

Hailed as the greatest African explorer, Henry Morton Stanley led one final, desperate trek across the uncharted Congo on a rescue mission. A group of English gentlemen were left behind in the middle of the jungle to guard the expedition’s supplies while Stanley made a mad dash to the coast. The true story of the five men left behind is the tale of “The Rear Column” by Simon Gray.

A rousing adventure story of survival, the play is also a piercing psychological study of the effects of isolation, constant danger, and hunger. The meticulously characterized men show the danger and horror of the colonial experience in the third world, and how even the best of intentions can break down in an excruciating ordeal. The Victorian Gentlemen fall from grace, but the play echos across the ages to today, asking would we behave any differently in the same situation? Sadly, given America’s noble, but often misguided meddling in the third world, the answer is probably not.

The Rear Column is based on actual events in the Congo, in 1887-8. Henry Gordon Stanley has set off to rescue Emin Pasha and left behind a “rear column” at Yambuya, on the banks of the Arruwimi River. They are to wait there for six hundred additional porters, to be delivered by Arab slave trader, Tippu-Tib. Only then are they to follow Stanley. Yambuya is an inhospitable place: the climate is hellish, dangers are all around. In the compound they have established a group of Englishmen hold down the fort. And wait. And wait. And wait. While the conditions take their devastating toll.

Stanley gave specific but not exactly clear instructions. Major Barttelot is in charge, but he acknowledges that he is “well and truly in Stanley’s web”. He practically can’t do right. Stanley — from whom absolutely nothing is heard until the very end — is a real, overwhelming presence throughout, a dark, complicated dominating shadow.

“The Rear Column” opens March 4 and runs Thursdays through Sundays at the Centre Theater, Norristown’s professional theater at 208 DeKalb St. in downtown Norristown. Showtimes are 8 p.m. with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$22 and can be purchased online at www.ticketleap.com. Call 610-279-1013 for information or visit the web at www.ironagetheatre.org

Norristown’s Centre Theater is part of the developing Norristown Arts Hill. Having been established as the professional theater in Montgomery County since 1996, the Centre is the anchor of the new arts district. This coming year the Centre Theater is also undergoing a major renovation which will dramatically enhance and expand the ability to provide art for the community.



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The late Simon Gray was one of the wittiest and most respected British playwrights of the last fifty years. His biting comic plays like “Butley,” “Otherwise Engaged,” and “Quartermaine’s Terms,” were huge hits. Gray was described as roguishly witty, sardonic, and intelligent. He was almost a literary stereotype, a grimly funny personality, both deeply creative and determinedly self-destructive. He wrote over 40 plays and five novels all the while teaching at the University of London. “The Rear Column” was originally directed by another renowned playwright, Harold Pinter and starred Jeremy Irons.

“The Rear Column” stars an extraordinary cast of Philadelphia talent. Ray Saraceni stars as Jameson, the saintly scholar who has a shocking fall from grace. Saraceni has worked across the region including Philadelphia Shakespeare Company, Theater Exile and Villanova as well as many Iron Age productions. Playing his foil the troubled Major Bartelot is Adam Altman, who most recently played the sadistic guard in “The Life of John Henry.” Altman has also performed with the Delaware Shakespeare Company, the Arden Theater, and at other theaters in the area. Local stage combat legend and teacher/performer at the University of the Arts Charles Conwell plays the mysterious and inscrutable H.M. Stanley.

The cast is rounded out by Chuck Beishl, David Fiebert, Luke Moyer and Tiffany Joyner.

To support the production, Iron Age is posting a regular production blog. Actors, the directors, local experts on the issues of the play and the playwright will share their thoughts on the rehearsal process, the themes of the play and background for the production. This resource will enhance the audience’s experience, “It is like a living talk back,” said Director John Doyle.

Working together the Centre Theater and Iron Age Theatre have been one of the most critically acclaimed companies in the area for over fifteen years. The Philadelphia City Paper called the companies, ***The area’s most under appreciated professional theater.*** Receiving Barrymore nominations for a number of their productions the companies have also premiered six plays in the past two years including last falls hit “The Life of John Henry,” “Citizen Paine,” “Waiting for the Ship from Delos,” and Jeffrey Hatcher’s “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”

The Centre Theater is in the Montgomery County Cultural Center at 208 DeKalb Street in Norristown. It is easily reached via routes 202, I-76, I-476 and Ridge Pike. There is plenty of free parking and the theater is one block from Septa’s Norristown Transit Center on the R6 line.

Call 610-279-1013 for tickets and information or visit the web at www.ironagetheatre.org

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Digital Images Available Upon Request