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REVIEW

Theater Interview and Review (Chicago): Dennis Watkins, Author of *The Magnificents*

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Let's get the important message out of the way: Go see *The Magnificents*. A production of Chicago's [House Theatre](#), it's part Chagall painting, part commedia dell' arte, and part meditation on the nature of family, love and loss. It weaves magic, storytelling and audience inclusion into a don't-miss jewel of an experience.

The plot is a simple one, but finely etched. It's the tale of an elderly magician, his wife, an orphan boy who crosses their path, and a trio of clowns who form the chorus. The story is shot through with magic tricks, compelling use of animation, and set design that pulls you into the moment and propels the plot. But don't let the simplicity deceive you. I couldn't shake certain images, certain moments from my mind, hours after I'd left the theater.

With this play, the House Theatre of Chicago achieves in spades what so many theater companies aspire to create: a resonant, living, deeply moving experience. This is done by directly including the audience, starting with bringing an audience member on stage as an honorary member of the company to help with pre-show announcements.

That's just the the first thing that grabbed me, and it kept building from there. The emotional reach of the story is irresistible, due to a spare and sensitive story line and a superb cast, who, in the words of the company, give "One-Hundred Percent."

The Magnificents gave me an evening of theater that broke my heart open a little, then made me want to jump up and yell 'Hurrah!' I can't remember the last time I felt that way.

Dennis Watkins, the play's author and one of its stars, talks to BC readers.

Can you tell us a little bit about your odyssey here....about your own contact with magic as a young person, your involvement in theater, and how they inspired *The Magnificents*?

I grew up learning magic from my grandfather, Ed Watkins. He was a great close-up magician who ran a magic shop in Dallas called Douglas Magicland. I can't say that I remember my first introduction to magic, but I

certainly remember how much I loved it as a kid. My grandfather took me under his wing and began teaching me when I was very little. By the time I was about eight, I was performing at neighborhood events, birthday parties, and other local events. Then, around high school, I started taking theater classes. I fell in love with acting and studied it in college. After graduating from SMU I moved to Chicago with a group of my classmates and started The House Theatre of Chicago.

Our first production was *Death and Harry Houdini*. The show had a lot of magic in it and was a really exciting and highly fictionalized bio play about Houdini. I was lucky enough to play the famous magician...and I loved every minute of it. After Houdini, The House grew at an enormous rate. In addition to acting and directing for the company, I worked as a designer, creating magic for all of our original shows.

Two years ago my grandfather passed away. After he died, I found myself going back and reconstructing a lot of his old magic tricks and routines. I fell in love with magic all over again. The result of this is *The Magnificents*. The play is hugely inspired by my grandfather and I can only hope it is a fitting tribute to his huge heart, unending patience and inspiring imagination.

What do you think are the key ingredients of good theater? And what are some of the theatrical experiences that have moved you the most as audience member?

There are a lot of things that make good theater. The story is king, in my book, though. In *The Magnificents*, the story is very simple, but it's still strong and it still has weight. When story drives a piece of theater, then it has a much better chance of capturing and holding an audience. I've been involved in lots of projects where spectacle, production, or any number of other elements get in the way of the story. When this happens, the plays simply don't work. When all elements serve the story, though, that's where the magic happens.

Second to story, I think theater makers have to have a strong focus on the audience. It's for them, after all. If they are the focus of everything you make, then you know it will interest them. There are lots of ways to create work that is FOR the audience...There are lots of tools at your disposal. The most powerful one, of course, is imagination. I don't mean your ability to imagine or create. I am speaking about the imagination of the audience. Good theater must ignite and inspire the audience's imagination. You can do this with dance, music, magic, dialogue...any number of methods for communicating story. As long as your method requires the audience to use their imagination, you're forcing them to invest in what they're watching. Once they've made that investment, most of your work is done.

I've had several really great theater experiences. I studied in London for a year in college and will never forget being a groundling at The Globe. It was the first time that, as an audience member, I felt I was part of the show. That's when it became clear how powerful it is to destroy that awful fourth wall we build in the theater and really share a story with the audience. I think the fourth wall is deadly for live theater. They do it better in the movies...let them have the fourth wall. Let live theater share the same space as its audience.

You're a member of The House Theatre....share the core of its philosophy. How does House connect with and help build community?

At the core of The House's philosophy is the following mission statement:

It is the mission of The House to unite Chicago in the spirit of Community through amazing feats of Storytelling.

The House is interested in creating community, if only for a few hours at a time. We do this through the ritual of theater. Every night we do a new show WITH (not for) a new audience. They are vital to what happens on stage and they can feel it. They share that feeling with the 140 other people that walk into the theater that night.

Maybe they laugh or cry. Maybe they're moved...Regardless, there was a shared experience that was unique to the collection of people in the audience that night.

Talk a little about the process of creating this piece, and your fellow cast members.

Creating this piece was a joy. Molly Brennan (our director) is a genius. She has a phenomenal way of getting us to be alive, alert and real in the space. We did a lot of workshopping. We worked constantly on the fundamentals of clowning. We worked at being emotionally available. We worked at reacting to each other and to the audience in real and exciting ways.

The script I wrote was, largely, an action script. I wrote what had to happen to move the story forward. I wrote the essentials of the characters and what they do to each other.

However, a lot of what I wrote was very vague. For example, I wrote:

"Three clowns enter driving a make-shift ambulance. This might be a shopping cart or a little red wagon. The clowns give The Old Man the once over. This, no doubt, includes the mis-use of medical equipment and unintentional beating of the patient. This scene should be fast-paced and hilarious. It should be light and ridiculous, as opposed to dark and scary, like the end of Act 1."

From there, Molly, Paul (the assistant director) and the rest of us would slowly build the work. It was an absolute blast from beginning to end.

What's something not in the official bio?

Something not in the official bio...

Hmmm...

The canary in the show is Rosie. She's named after my grandmother.

The Magnificents runs through November 3 at the Viaduct Theater.

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Comments

