

Treasure Island

Cheltenham Center for the Arts, 439 Ashbourne Rd., Cheltenham, through Dec. 11 (379-4027).

Ken Marini's production of *Treasure Island* begins with a pre-curtain fundraising speech that transforms itself into a sublime piece of silliness (which I'll leave as a surprise and not describe here).

This first comic moment sets the tone for the entire evening. It's not that Marini stages *Treasure Island* as a camp send-up of Robert Louis Stevenson's tale of pirates and buried treasure. Quite the opposite: once the audience sees the silliness of it all, once the audience is freed to laugh, it's prepared for anything. The opening comic gambit buys the production the most precious commodity in the theater — time: time to play the adventure story straight out, for all its atmosphere, and for all its very real sense of dread and wonder.

And so, for the first half hour or so, time and all the resources of the theater are on the production's side. In the first moments, in the Admiral Benbow Inn in Bristol, we are introduced to a truly terrifying series of scoundrels and cutthroats (played by Tony Lawton, Philip Lynch, Peter Pryor and others) who wouldn't hesitate to slice your face or cut off your finger at the slightest provocation. And the director and his designers (Laila Kjoersvik-Swanson, Troy Martin O'Shia, and M. Michael Montgomery) give us beautiful groupings and tableaux, in russets and blues as though illuminated by candlelight or moonlight, that seem as though N.C. Wyeth's famous illustrations to the novel have sprung to life.

And then time runs out, and the silliness takes over. First it's Long John Silver's parrot, Captain Flint, played here by the Energizer Bunny. Then it's Ben Gunn, the crazy pirate who has been marooned on Skeleton Island for three years, played by Pryor as though he had wandered in from somebody else's production of *The Tempest*. By the time we get to Doctor Liversy's paean to Parmesan cheese, the audience on the opening night had simply lost it.

Occasionally, the production shows a sly sense of humor, winking at the audience about its own juvenile machismo, as in a wonderful extended fight scene between two pirates who are almost too drunk to stand up but no less deadly for it (John Bellomo and Pryor once again), brilliantly choreographed by Darla Max (who appears, in drag, as one of the mutineers).

But otherwise, the more the production tries to play it straight (and the script — an adaptation by character actor Bernard Miles, with Peter Coe and Josephine Miles, which he revived annually in London for decades — plays it *very* straight), the funnier the audience found it (particularly a half dozen actors from People's Light and Theatre who had come to their friends' opening night on their own night off, who squealed with delight and, no doubt, sympathy at the slightest provocation).

Long John Silver is played with great subtlety and a sly charm (and without a trace of Wallace Beery or Robert Newton campiness) by Tim Moyer. And young Jim Hawkins is played by Trevor Davis (all six-foot-something of him) with wide-eyed sincerity.

But the production fails to establish the surrogate father/son relationship between the two at the heart of the play's action. It's too busy trying — and failing — to stave off the silliness.

— Cary M. Mazer