

Hay Fever, Noël Coward's comedy of bad manners, swept into the Mainstage Theatre of the UWM Peck School of the Arts tonight, and brought riotous results.

It's a summer's day on an English country estate in the Berkshires, and each member of the Bliss household has decided to invite their secret paramour down from London for the weekend. Only thing is, none of them, mother Judith, former leading lady of the London Stage, nor father David, successful novelist, Simon, trouble making son nor Sorel, ever-romantic daughter, has let on to anyone else their plans.

To say more would give away the most peculiar entertainments of this decidedly outlandish family.

This production, cleverly directed by Rebecca Holderness, with classic Art Deco setting by Kurt Sharp, provides the perfect playpen for this raucous family and their sometimes witty, sometimes outrageous, pursuits. Pamela Rehberg's costumes evoke the bygone era of the Roaring Twenties.

Holderness has done a brilliant job of interpreting this period classic for a modern audience. Without altering dialog, she worked with this fine cast (2/3rds of whom are graduating seniors), finding their way into characters from another time, understanding the sensibility behind the humor, and making the language speak clearly to us. Their first rehearsal of the script was at Ten Chimneys, the Genesee Depot estate of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, contemporaries and colleagues of Coward. In this setting, and through personal selections of inspiring totems from that era – photographs, music, etc. – the cast crafted their characters.



The cast and crew of the upcoming production of “Hay Fever” had their first read-through at the renowned Ten Chimneys.

A feature of this production rarely seen by Milwaukee audiences is the inclusion of “Knee Plays.” These action filled intervals, interstitial skits, allow the full thrust stage to be redressed between each of the three acts by the performers themselves, always in character, and often providing us further insight into them and their motivations. Of particular note in this regard is Brittany Lee McDonald in the uncredited, walk-on role of Amy, the scullery maid nursing a toothache. She brings a refreshing insouciance to these interstices. Other stand-out performance nods to Toni Martin, whose sheer force of will powers the

towering character of Judith Bliss, undoubtedly the star of this family, and on the flip side, Evan Koepnick, whose sweet and subtle reading of Sandy Tyrell, Judith's romantic notion, is a delight for his meek ignorance in the face of daunting excess.

Tonight's performance brought one wholly unexpected piece of theatrical gold which is unlikely to be repeated. Near the end of the second act, Lineve Thurman, as Jackie Coryton, plops down dejectedly onto the divan, which one can only assume had been rushed to the stage, as it audibly cracked. Rather than being thrown by this, Thurman took it for an extra laugh, and worked it into the rest of her scene. This is the sort of skill that no class can teach, and Thurman carried the night with it.