Arcadia

★★★★½

New Leaf Theatre (see Fringe & storefront). By Tom Stoppard. Dir. Jessica Hutchinson. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 50mins; one intermission.

TEMPORAL FRAY Harman and Fenderson are separated by centuries.

In Tom Stoppard's dense but sparkling 1993 work, a precocious young student intuits in 1809 that everything in nature can be represented by a mathematical formula. Later, she teases out the basics of the second law of thermodynamics years before it's officially formulated. At the top of the play, though, her concerns lie elsewhere. "What is carnal embrace?" Thomasina (Hilary Williams, brimming with sleepy-eyed appeal) asks her tutor, Septimus Hodge (a rakish Billy Fenderson). Science and sex, *Arcadia* suggests, are inseparably intertwined.

Stoppard bounces back and forth between the Sidley Park estate of Thomasina and Septimus's time, when the grounds are buzzing with gossip about the visiting (but unseen) Lord Byron, and the same house in the present day, where a pair of warring scholars set up camp among the family's modern descendants. One writing about the history of the English garden, the other on Byron's trail, they try to piece together the evidence the earlier inhabitants left behind.

Amid nearly three hours of heady talk encompassing physics, poetry, mathematics and landscape architecture, Stoppard cleverly comments on the futility of our desire for order in the universe. In his rush to publish, cocksure egotist Bernard (Dan Granata) wildly misinterprets the facts as they play out in the earlier century, while the pragmatic Hannah (a terrific Marsha Harman) finds her search for an elusive historical hermit becoming improbably enlaced with Bernard's Byronic quest. Jessica Hutchinson's handsome, well-paced production deftly lays out the dual time lines, with stellar work by a pitch-perfect ensemble keeping the plot—unlike the universe—from succumbing to entropy.—*Kris Vire*

The Whole World Is Watching

★★★★½

Dog & Pony Theatre Company (see Fringe & storefront). Text and lyrics by Devon de Mayo and Stephen Ptacek. Music by Ptacek. Dirs. De Mayo, David Dieterich Gray, Elana Boulos. With ensemble cast. 1hr 20mins; no intermission.

DALEY SHOW The televised police riot blows up.

As Chicago gears up for the NATO conference and the protests expected to accompany it, Dog & Pony's look back at the heated atmosphere surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention feels especially timely. Devon de Mayo and Stephen Ptacek's experiential piece, staged promenade style in an upstairs rehearsal room at Victory Gardens Biograph Theater, surrounds us with signs of the times, including campaign posters for Hubert Humphrey and banks of TVs showing images evoking the fraught political environment. Before the show, actors pass out programs disguised as Eugene McCarthy pamphlets or Black Panthers literature, while others dressed as cops warily roam the crowd.

The collage-like text shows the buildup to the Grant Park riot from the perspectives of hippies, Yippies, reporters and cops, with the 13 ensemble members each playing a number of nameless characters via simple costume changes. Though a number of historical figures are name-dropped, from Tom Hayden to Bobby Seale to Mayor Richard J. Daley, none are portrayed. Ptacek's songs, given haunting vocal arrangements by Dan Mohr, suggest prayers of activism, with lyrics referencing "the blues that keep us up at night" and "the price of admission to the democratic conversation." The fluid, stand-up staging puts us always in the middle of the action, which builds steam toward a climactic, chaotic re-creation of the clash in front of the Hilton, given chilling first-person narration by performer Paige Collins.—*Kris Vire*

[title of show]

★★★½☆

Northlight Theatre (see Resident companies). Music and lyrics by Jeff Bowen. Book by Hunter Bell. Dir. Peter Amster. With Matthew Crowle, Stephen Schellhardt, McKinley Carter, Christine Sherrill. 1hr 45mins; no intermission.

THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE Sherrill, Carter, Crowle and Schellhardt, from left, complete their script.

Jeff Bowen and Hunter Bell's endearing metamusical, in which two guys named Jeff and Hunter pen a musical about penning a musical, hums with quirky, off-kilter appeal, even if you won't find yourself humming Bowen's slight tunes. From the opening number (titled "Untitled Opening Number"), *[title of show]* drops offbeat jokes and obscure musical-theater references like bread crumbs on the trail to Broadway. But its portrayal of underemployment, stalled careers and deferred dreams makes the show relatable even to non-obsessives.

Styled as a collection of blackout sketches, Bell's self-referential book tracks Hunter (Matthew Crowle) and Jeff (Stephen Schellhardt) as they battle blocks, distractions, fear and friction in their struggle to craft a show. They're joined by pals Heidi (Christine Sherrill), a big-voiced hoofer who's trouped through the backgrounds of a pair of Broadway shows, and Susan (McKinley Carter), an arch performer who's nearly given up the biz for a hated but steady office job.

The show's first half is a tight, jokey delineation of the creative process, with Bowen's numbers providing a grown-up *Schoolhouse Rock* feel. The second half, which Bell and Bowen continued to expand as their play went from showcase to Off Broadway to the Great White Way, spins out a little repetitively, though it gets points for honest depictions of some ugly moments. Northlight's cast, accompanied by Doug Peck on piano, winningly sells the material with expert timing. Crowle, in particular, imbues Hunter with an engagingly squirrelly energy.—*Kris Vire*

PHOTOS: TOP LEFT, TOM MCGRATH; TOP RIGHT, TIMMY SAMUEL; BOTTOM, MICHAEL BROSILOW

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