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FRONT PAGE COLUMNISTS ARTS &amp; EVENTS THE WEEK FULL TEXT

## Arts &amp; Events

**New: EYE FROM THE AISLE: "ISHI, the last of the Yahi" reprise at UCB Zellerbach Playhouse**

by John A. McMullen II

Tuesday March 06, 2012 - 11:17:00 AM



Intae Kim, Chris Herold

Ryan Montgomery

At Zellerbach Playhouse on the UC Berkeley Campus, the opening scene of John Fisher's **ISHI, the last of the Yahi**, appropriately enough, is a lecture by a young anthropology professor who relates the shocking incident—enacted for us—of a starving gold prospector who kills and eats a Native American. In the first of many action scenes, the prospector chases him around the spacious Playhouse underscored by banjo breakdown music (think "Smokey and the Bandit"). Finally, the weakened prospector shoots the Indian and eats him (offstage).

I scratched my head. Was this a comic scene? Why didn't the prospector just shoot him to begin with instead of chasing him? And how could a starving man keep up the chase like that?

That was my question at the start of the play. My question at the end of the play—THREE HOURS LATER—was why didn't award-winning playwright John Fisher take this opportunity to rewrite this play that premiered four years ago at Theatre Rhinoceros with an eye to shortening and tightening this intriguing script.

"ISHI, the last of the Yahi" is epic in its breadth. It is about the genocide of the Native American tribes as financed by the legislature of California by way of a \$5 bounty per head. It is about a man whose culture was destroyed and was starving in the wilderness before giving up and coming into the white man's town of Oroville in 1911, fully expecting to be killed. It is about the anthropologist who befriends him to study him. It is about ambition, using others, and then turning on them. It is about man's criminally ambitious culture, under the motto, "Homo homini lupus" (trans., man is a wolf to man). It has a little O'Neill, a little Albee, and a lot of history that UCB TDPS department lecturer Fisher liberally tweaks with poetic license.

Telling this tale educates us about the horrors and blood-money on which our society is founded.

Emotionally, its intention must be to break our hearts for this abandoned man and how his story affects those who first hear it.

Regrettably, by the end of the evening, the result is numbness from the length and repetition of horrors.

Lately, I watched "Angels in America," and at the end of Part Two, "Perestroika," it goes on and on lecturing, till finally it undoes much of the great writing and acting that came before, like a guest or lover who won't go away after the final goodbyes are said: ISHI is much like that.

Nevertheless, it's a play about Berkeley and California and White Guilt that should be seen, but prepare yourself with a double espresso first.

With a cast of 18, **ISHI** is a tale told in the aftermath: after the massacres, after the ambition has subsided, after the affairs have been played out. The tale is told through flashbacks and the telling of secrets—secrets that bond one another by their sharing while breeding familiar contempt.

The plays' historical characters like Phoebe Hearst and Alfred Kroeber after whom the Anthropology Museum and building are named (situated opposite Pacific Film Archives on Bancroft) should be immediately recognizable to the student and faculty audience.

Intae Kim, who is a virile young UCB student of Korean heritage, plays Ishi. The real Ishi was 49 and emaciated when he came out of the wilderness. Mr. Kim was stolidly effective in the role when not putting on a falsely lowered growling voice in a contrived idea of the speech of Native Americans. Admittedly, the casting puzzled me when I've seen so many Hispanic students walking across campus who much more closely resemble Ishi than this Asian actor; but by the second act, one relaxed into the cross-cultural casting.

Chris Herold, an Equity actor and a department lecturer, is well-cast in the lead as Andrew Kroeber who is building a world class anthropology department at UCB and finds this living treasure trove named Ishi. Herold even looks like photos of the real Kroeber. Students often learn by acting with their teachers; playing with your betters is always instructive and betters one's game.

At first, the rest of the student cast vastly overacted, but later settled into to a semblance of naturalism.

This was due perhaps to a misguided attempt at "big" acting to fill up the large theatre.

The vocal production of the student actors set my teeth on edge. In their attempt to be heard in the Playhouse, they pushed till I could feel their vocal chords rasp against each other. It is an indictment of the department that the students have not been tutored in this important skill. There is far too much shouting in the play which also has a tendency to numb us emotionally.

Exceptions are: supporting player Emma Nichols as Kroeber's suffragette "man-hating" sister-in-law Charlotte who brings a clear and cutting character fashioned on the Oscar Wilde/Ambrose Bierce model of biting and witty humor, and Fisher's dialogue shines in their clashes; and Matthew Capbarat as Kroeber's protégé young professor Thomas Waterman, who is convincing and natural in his role, though his acting is in broad strokes and could be enhanced with nuance and subtext. As Ishi's sister, Nancy Martinez Soto's physical expressiveness of emotional extremes brings us closer to pathos than any other moment.

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Fisher's poetic license transforms the Texas-born, outdoorsman very male doctor Saxton Pope who attends Ishi into a bisexual British woman played by Kirsten Luise Peacock, who employs an overdone Received dialect. A linchpin of the story is Kroeber's relationship with his dying, tubercular wife Henrietta, played by lovely Gwen Kingston, who ostensibly infects Ishi which eventually kills him.

Another nagging question was why Kroeber and the others were not infected from such close contact since a vaccine didn't arrive till ten years later. Would Henrietta not have been in a sanatorium? Though tuberculosis is the world's leading cause of death in humans from a single infectious agent, modern audiences don't know much about it. Questions like these tend to pull one out of the story to ponder the congruity, and could well be addressed in the play.

The counterpoint direction of John Fisher on the very large stage—where action is happening at one end while a conversation ensues in another—is always in harmony. The ultimate expressionistic story-telling device—pre-recorded, voiced-over thoughts—of both Ishi and Kroeber work seamlessly and are sometimes comic, often poignant. But of all the story-telling methods Mr. Fisher uses, a notably ingenious one is the format of translating Ishi's conversation: the translator makes the first translation, after which the two for whom he is translating merely talk as if it is being translated; it is a sure and easy convention that solves what could have been a clunky problem.

The set design by Annie Smart and costumes by Wendy Sparks are sumptuous in design. A wonderfully grand period staircase and an Edwardian/Californian bedroom would account for the entire yearly budget of many departments. Women's fashions in this period were based on Early Art Deco and were works of art, and Ms. Sparks does justice to that tradition: the fabrics and beading bring one immediately into the wealth and style of the period. Drop-down transparent silk 70' silk screen with sometimes violent, sometimes lovely pictures and paintings add stunning and instructive visuals. The lighting design of David K.H. Elliot is masterful in its change of place and mood and isolation of scenes.

The middle of the stage is taken up with a 60' plus tiered sunken recess nearly six feet deep. (I remember it being filled with water for Mary Zimmerman's "Metamorphosis" a few years ago.) It is well-used by Fisher's direction as a river, and many other imaginative sites. In many of the wild chase scenes of massacre all around the auditorium, even up to the catwalks, the athletic cast repeatedly leaps into this pool and lands with bone-crunching percussion which shocks us and serves as a resonant metaphor for the hardiness and violence of the times.

The tickets are inexpensive, it's worth your time, and it's important to support the department and the students, so I recommend it. I also recommend that you check out this link for a quick little background before you go: [http://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/outreach/pdfs/ishi\\_teaching\\_kit.pdf](http://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/outreach/pdfs/ishi_teaching_kit.pdf)

#### **ISHI, the last of the Yahi**

Written and directed by John Fisher

UCB Zellerbach Playhouse through March 15

510.642.8827 <http://tdps.berkeley.edu/productions-events/tickets-subscriptions/>

Scenic design Annie Smart, costume design Wendy Sparks, lighting design David K. H. Elliot, sound design Scott Koue, original music composition Don Seaver. Stage management by Valerie Tu.

WITH: Audrey Baker, Evan Bartz, Shireen Beygui, Matthew Capbarat, Daryl Green, Christopher Herold\*, Khizer Iqbal, Sanford Jackson, Kayal Khanna, Intae Kim, Gwen Kingston, Michael J. Kunze, Nancy Martinez Soto, Emma Nichols, Kirsten Luisa Peacock, Devon Roe, Michael Rosen, Joaquin Ticonderoga

\*member, Actors Equity Association

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*John A. McMullen II is a member of the SF Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle, American Theatre Critics Association, and Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. E.J. Dunne edits.*