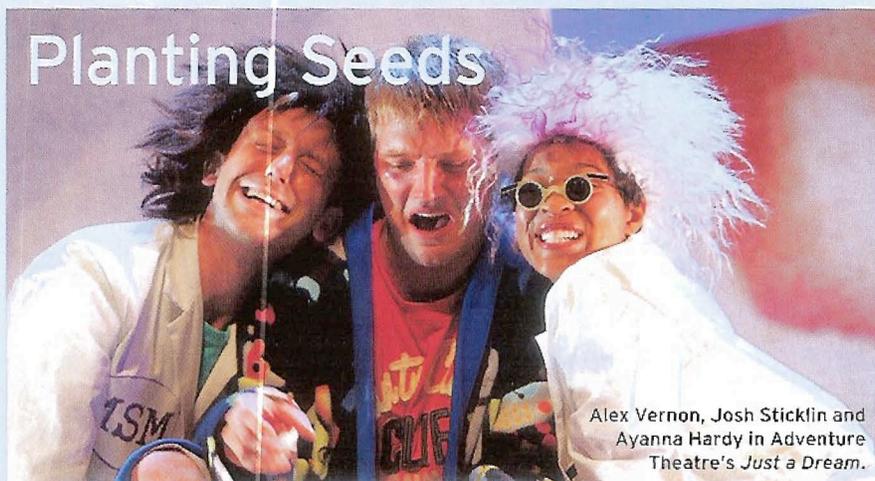


## ■ WASHINGTON, D.C.



Alex Vernon, Josh Sticklin and Ayanna Hardy in Adventure Theatre's *Just a Dream*.

COURTESY OF SINGAPORE REPERORY THEATRE

"IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A GREAT audience," says Michael Bobbitt, "look down. Children may still have their hands in the dirt, but those early years are fertile ground." As artistic director of Adventure Theatre, the longest-running children's theatre in the D.C. area, Bobbitt has demonstrated how theatre helps our deepest values take root—and he does it with a hearty sprinkle of laughter and play. For the company's next phase, with a larger focus on touring, Bobbitt has developed a show that might just save the world.

*Just a Dream: The Green Play* will tour dozens of schools in April and early May, to coincide with Earth Month. Adapted by Sandra Eskin from a picture book by Chris Van Allsburg, the play follows a boy named Walter as he turns his life as a litterbug into a stirring plea for preserving the planet. Says Bobbitt, "On top of it being a really fun story, it's a great opportunity to cross-pollinate theatre, education and the environment."

Last spring, Adventure toured *Just a Dream* to 40 schools, nearly all within a 50-mile

radius of Washington. With bonus weeks in July in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur—the company's first international gigs—Bobbitt tallies about 28,000 audience members so far. He remarks that the kids' "visceral" reactions have been gratifying: "They're responding immediately. And that passion is addictive for the artists."

*Just a Dream* encapsulates Adventure Theatre's approach to the arts. The story is topical. It's lightweight and portable, easily toured with three actors, but vivid and imaginative. It also sticks to Bobbitt's three tenets of educational theatre. First: Get the facts right. Second: Keep the plot interactive from beginning to end. Third: Use the closing moments to call the kids to action.

"This is a lifelong trend," says Bobbitt. "Theatre-going begets more theatre-going." Fortunately, as Adventure Theatre increases its touring presence regionally and nationally, more young audiences will be learning to plant their own seeds. "I'm always sad to meet people who don't buy children's theatre as legitimate," Bobbitt adds. "I say to them, why do you think there are any adults out there who love theatre? It's because we saw it when we were kids." —Hunter Styles

## ■ MINNEAPOLIS

## FEAR TAKES FLIGHT

CONOR MCPHERSON'S NEWEST play flew into the Guthrie Theater Feb. 25 for previews. *The Birds* is based on Daphne du Maurier's short story—which is also the inspiration for the famous Alfred Hitchcock film.

McPherson re-imagines the story of three strangers, played by J.C. Cutler, Angela Timberman and Summer Hagen, who flock to an abandoned house as masses of birds attack their sea town. In order to better explore the oppressive fear of being trapped together, the Guthrie set its production in its smallest space, the Dowling Studio, under the direction of Henry Wishcamper.

Ornithologists weren't needed for this production. According to Wishcamper, "The tension, the claustrophobia, comes from the actors on stage." In the style of pre-Tippi Hedren Hitchcock, the thrills in this play rely primarily on a suspension of disbelief. *The Birds* premiered at Gate Theatre in Dublin, where McPherson is a company member and runs at the Guthrie through April 8. —Lauren Smart

## ■ BERKELEY, CALIF.

## MAMET FOR THE 99 PERCENT

THEATREFIRST HAS BEEN KNOWN IN the Bay Area for two things: producing fresh and diverse theatrical offerings—like the Iraq War-themed *Welcome Home*, Jenny Sutter, a jazzy *Grapes of Wrath* and the prickly *Anton in Show Business*—and also being the only professional theatre company in Oakland. Highly placed Bay Area talents such as Dominique Lozano, Mark Jackson, Jon Tracy, MaryBeth Cavanaugh and Warren David Keith have worked under its banner. The company also runs a successful education program in the inner city.

Losing its lease in the Fox Oakland Building for the 2011–12 season, however, forced the company on the road, away from the theatre community it had worked so hard to build. *Hanging Georgia*, a multi-character biopic of Georgia O'Keefe, was performed in San Francisco's *Thick House*. And TheatreFIRST's next production, David Mamet's *Oleanna*, will be produced at the Berkeley City Club April 20–May 13. According to artistic director Michael Storm, who helms the show, Mamet's play is famous for being about sexual politics, but "it interrogation of larger class and economic power structures in our country has never been more pertinent, what with the financial crisis, the current elections and the 'Occupy' events."

With this production, TheatreFIRST continues its commitment to nontraditional and multi-ethnic casting: Josie Alvarez, a Latin-American actor, will take on the role of Carol which Storm expects will deepen the issues of class warfare in the play. As he puts it, "This play is about power—who has it, and how and why they keep it. I think it's going to be extremely timely." —Kevin DiPirro



Storm at the company's former home