

## Review

# Darwin Delivers

By: **Chad Young**, Managing Editor, *Nashville Parent*

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“Where did we come from?” and “Where are we going after this existence?” are age-old questions that have been hot topics of debate for centuries. In Tennessee Repertory Theatre’s season finale of Crispin Whittell’s *Darwin in Malibu*, these thought-provoking arenas erupt front and center in a truly witty manner.

The Rep is the third company in the country to bring *Darwin in Malibu* to an American stage — the show debuted in 2003 in Birmingham, England, and premiered in Los Angeles in May 2006, then in New York in August 2006.

The plot finds Charles Darwin (the ever-delightful Henry Haggard) living on a beach in Malibu, Ca., 120 years after the publication of his famous work, *The Origin of Species*, which launched acceptance of his ideas (well, at least in some circles). Living with him is a girl, Sarah (Kahle Reardon), who is young enough to be his granddaughter and loves making banana smoothies and supplying the father of evolution with his daily newspaper (so he can keep up with his horoscope), romance novels and the occasional “alternative cigarette.”

Relaxing on his back deck, presumably admiring “babes” strolling across the beach, Haggard delivers the first of many hilarious lines: “Who needs evolution when there’s plastic surgery?” This sets a tone that beckons the audience to maintain a sense of humor and an open mind, especially when debating a controversial issue.

Interestingly, while Haggard’s character offers up his opinions, quips and ever-evolving ideas, he tends to take a backseat while two fellows from his past re-appear to bring the creation-versus-evolution debate back to vivid, animated life.

Enter Thomas Huxley (Chip Arnold) and Bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce (Sam Whited). In real life, back in 1860 when *The Origin of Species* first published, Huxley (who supported Darwin’s theory of evolution and is credited with dubbing the term “agnosticism”) and Wilberforce (the obvious religious opponent) faced each other in an actual debate on the topic at hand.

Directed by Rene Copeland, Arnold and Whited heat up the stage arguing the sides of their characters’ perspectives with vigor and quick wit, delivering the funniest lines in the show with perfect timing and authenticity. Mr. Haggard, as usual, masterfully encapsulates his character. While Reardon tends to overact her character’s stoner-chick persona in the first act, she more than makes up for it when she hits her stride in Act II, revealing quite a twist in her character’s story arc.

The Rep chose the perfect show to wrap up it's 2008/2009 season. Really great theater—especially straight plays—SHOULD spark true, thought-provoking material that makes one ponder, question and ultimately challenge one's position and mindset. When my friend and I left the theater on opening night, we found ourselves in a seriously deep-rooted conversation about our beliefs and standpoints, feeling so inspired after experiencing this play... THAT is what really great theater should enable in it's audience, and Tennessee Repertory Theatre succinctly delivers with this one.

And if you've ever wondered what constitutes the difference between pigeon Heaven and pigeon Hell... well, you'll just have to buy tickets to *Darwin in Malibu* and find out for yourself!