

Review

'Darwin' takes humor-tinged look at emotional topic

By: **Evans Donnell**, *The Tennessean*

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In Tennessee Repertory Theatre's revival of *Darwin in Malibu*, don't expect any resolution to the conflict between creationists and evolutionists.

Instead, the audience is humorously reminded that such weighty matters as the start and end of life are not black-and-white subjects, despite what some on both sides would have us believe. There's plenty of gray when we wade into these areas, and British playwright Crispin Whittell's 2003 play does a solid job of pointing that up.

We find ourselves at a beachfront home in Malibu, Calif., in the present day. Charles Darwin (Henry Haggard) is enjoying the sun, a saucy novel and a banana shake made by his young companion, Sarah (Kahle Reardon).

The deceased author of *The Origin of Species* is soon joined by two men who figured prominently in the early debate about that 1859 book—biologist Thomas Huxley (Chip Arnold), a passionate defender of Darwin's work; and Samuel Wilberforce (Sam Whited), the Bishop of Oxford who argued strongly against it.

This fantasy reunion of men who lived and died in the 19th century provides a theatrical opportunity for them to continue the debate that started so long ago. What comes out of it will perhaps surprise American ears accustomed to the polarizing arguments that continue to spring up here whenever Darwin's work is mentioned. I won't start quoting the play, because its wit shouldn't be spoiled for people who plan to see it. Just know that that wit and the deeper thought behind it are deftly expressed by the performers director René D. Copeland has assembled for this show. Arnold applies the right mix of angry bluster and slowly revealed pain to Huxley, who, like the others, has suffered a loss that greatly impacts his feelings about the issues being debated. Reardon handles the lighter and heavier aspects of her mysterious young character seamlessly. Haggard and Whited are obviously comfortable in the skins of these characters, as they seem every time they take the stage. It's a pleasure to watch such believable performances. Both actors have a talent for reminding us that comedy and drama are two sides of the same coin, and they make it look so effortless that you know they worked very hard beforehand. As usual Tennessee Rep's designers have handled the production's other elements well. Gary C. Hoff's terrific set, complete with a patio and sandy beach, is complemented by Trish Clark's costumes, Phillip Franck's lighting and Miles Price's sound. *Darwin in Malibu* reminds us that the creation/evolution debate is not as easy to resolve as some might have us think. In Tennessee Repertory Theatre's capable hands, this entertaining, funny fantasy uses dramatic form to thankfully make that debate more humane and balanced.