

# Little Handcar on the PRAIRIE

Upstream Theater's flight of fancy *Aerwacol* brings wilderness to light *By Margaret Bauer*



Christopher Harris as John MacColl in Sean Dixon's *Aerwacol*

It can be a bit discomfiting to discuss theater, that most variable and elusive art, with someone so thoughtfully precise as Upstream Theater artistic director Philip Boehm. Mention a potential theme, a thread plucked from the fabric of a play's text, and he'll say, "Yes, that's right. But ..." Almost inevitably, there's that but. You may begin to think Boehm is being deliberately elliptical, or testing you somehow, until you remember: *This is what he does for a living.*

His is not the hand of arbitrary adjustment. As an award-winning literary translator—and the husband of a brilliant Polish-born scholar of Cuban and Spanish-American literature, Washington University's Elzbieta Sklodowska—Boehm trades upon his ability to be punctiliously exact with language. Yet his precision is about more than correctitude. Boehm's close reading of each play enables him to convey its nuances, which often derive from another culture's customs, to his actors, enabling them to render the play's emotional content in a universal way.

Boehm is also skilled at boiling themes and character sketches down to their "distilled essence," which can then be imparted to designers and actors. Often

this essence finds expression in a sound or musical motif. "I listen to a lot of music and think a lot in that vein," he explains. "I often hear a sound that is the starting point for me for how to stage a play. That doesn't mean that by the end of the process the sound is still there, but that's how I start."

In the case of this month's U.S. premiere performance of Canadian playwright Sean Dixon's *Aerwacol*, Boehm imagines the sound, borne on the wind, of the rhythmic clanging of a halyard or cable in a distant harbor or train station. One of the play's initial performances, in fact, took place in an old railroad dockyard in Toronto; another performance was staged under a bridge in Vancouver. Upstream's premiere takes place in the cavernous Little Theater on the Park, a converted church on South Skinker Boulevard. "A lot of what we do relies on the specific architecture of the space where we're performing," says Boehm. In the Little Theater, lighting is centrally important to reconstituting the world of *Aerwacol*.

The work's title, an Anglo-Saxon word, means "early awake," which for Dixon evoked images of a breaking dawn. As the play opens, character John MacColl (Christopher Harris) ministers to his wife,

Kimpy (Jane Paradise), who suffers from the fever that has claimed their daughter, Alice. When she awakes and learns of Alice's fate, Kimpy leaps out of bed and into the woods, where she finds an old handcar on a lonely stretch of railroad track—and thus begins the couple's unpredictable flight into the Canadian wilderness. Each character they encounter as they head east, including erstwhile student Dillard Wells (Nicholas Tamarkin), former mines inspector Isaac Harper (Peter Mayer) and young Quebecois woman Aubade Hébert (Emily Piro), has suffered his or her own misfortune. "Instead of plot, these layered relationships—these internal relationships, people inhabiting their own space, their own grief—somehow spring these people into motion," says Boehm.

*Aerwacol* provides an intriguing and at times playful middle ground to Upstream's season, alighting between Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, which portrays two South African brothers of mixed descent isolated due to racial laws, and Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, depicting a lonely soldier exploited by his superiors. "It's not as if we could string out the marketing banner and say, 'The season of isolation!'" says Boehm. "But they do work well together."

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK SCHNELLE

*Upstream Theater's Aerwacol runs February 20 to March 1 at the Little Theater on the Park, 305 S. Skinker. All shows take place at 8 p.m. except Sundays at 7 p.m. For tickets and additional information, visit [upstreamtheater.org](http://upstreamtheater.org).*