

PAT CRAIG: THEATER

Outlook is bright for ACT's classic 'Rainmaker'

[By Pat Craig](#)

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Pa Curry fiddles around the stove, banging pots and pans, like he was auditioning to be a one-man band. Smoke pours from the burners as he starts breakfast for his two boys, Noah and Jim.

Then the whole place starts shaking.

For a split second, you figure American Conservatory Theater has come up with some excellent special effects for its production of "The Rainmaker." But then one of the spotlights begins to jiggle and the seats seem to be rocking with an enthusiasm far beyond mere special effects, and you realize it was an earthquake that had nothing to do with the show that opened Tuesday night.

But for a moment there ...

Actually, nobody on- or offstage seemed particularly perturbed by the 5.6-scale quake, centered around San Jose. It did prompt some nervous intermission laughter, but by then, most of the audience had become caught up in the buoyant 1954 melodrama by N. Richard Nash.

The show has an old feel to it -- when was the last time you saw a play performed in three acts with two intermissions? But the sense is more vintage classic than tottering chestnut, most probably because director Mark Rucker and his cast wring all the laughs they can squeeze out of Nash's well-crafted yarn.

And it works amazingly well by blunting, somewhat, the melodrama that could seem overblown and silly to contemporary audiences, yet giving full measure to the anguish, hope, faith and love that are still very much a part of the story.

Turning it more toward comedy wasn't forced -- Nash put the humor in there. It's just played a little harder at ACT than it probably was in the original version of this story about a family enduring life on a drought-stricken farm and dealing with the romantic drought of sister Lizzie (Rene Augesen), despite the questionable efforts of her pa, H.C. Curry (Jack Willis), and brothers, Noah (Stephen Barker Turner) and Jim (Alex Morf). The men, although sincere in their

desire to see Lizzie married, are a bit ham-fisted in their efforts. They are also a study in contrasts: Pa is practical; Noah is grumpy and casts doubt on anything approaching hope; and Jim is a hormone-fueled rebel with his eye set on a fast gal in a little red hat.

And then there's Bill Starbuck (Geordie Johnson), the mysterious drifter who tells the Curry family he can bring rain for 100 bucks. The family is pretty sure it's a con, but they go along with the scam because Lizzie is losing hope that a fella will ever come along.

The show plays with a wonderfully stylized realism (you'd be hard-pressed to find characters this glib on a plains or prairie farm) with neatly understated dialects that are used to let you feel the dust in the characters' voices, but not enough to overwhelm the story.

There is an impressive chemistry between both Augesen and Johnson and Augesen and Willis, whose performance as the father is both heartwarming and beautifully created. Morf is extremely facile as young Jim, with a wildly funny performance that captures the cow-town Romeo in his prime.

Robert Morgan's set is a tribute to practicality disguised as art as pieces move from the wings and ceiling to create several locations. And the story is both well-written and well-told -- a-don't-make-'em-like-they-used-to tale that succeeds in its goal of simply being entertaining.

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REVIEW

- WHAT: American Conservatory Theater presents "The Rainmaker," by N. Richard Nash
- WHEN: Tuesdays-Sundays, through Nov. 25
- WHERE: 415 Geary St., S.F.
- RUNNING TIME: 23/4 hours
- HOW MUCH: \$17-\$82
- CONTACT: 415-749-2228, <http://www.act-sf.org>