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'Open Mind Firmament' an engrossing homage to Yeats, scholar Barton Friedman

By **Tony Brown**, **The Plain Dealer**
May 20, 2010, 6:00AM



Steve Wagner

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Scholar Barton Friedman (John Stuehr, left) writes about Irish hero Cuchulain (Ray McNiece) and poet W.B. Yeats (Brett Keyser) in "Open Mind Firmament."

REVIEW Open Mind Firmament

What: Cleveland Public Theatre presents a play based on the works of W.B. Yeats and Barton Friedman, adapted and directed by Raymond Bobgan.

When: Through Saturday, June 5. Performances at 7 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. Matinee at 3 p.m. Sunday; 7 p.m. performance Monday.

Where: Cleveland Public Theatre's Gordon Square Theatre, 6415 Detroit Ave.

Tickets: \$10-\$21. Go to [cponline.org](#) or call 216-631-2727, ext. 501.

"I want to create for myself an unpopular theater."

So said **William Butler Yeats**, the Irish poet, playwright, politician and playboy (1865-1939).

Cleveland Public Theatre's "**Open Mind Firmament**" is nothing of the sort, yet is also true to Yeats' vision of "a mysterious theater" that is more "a memory and a prophecy" than realistic.

Engrossing, hypnotic and viscerally literary, this homage to both Yeats and Cleveland State University Yeats scholar **Barton Friedman** entailed a year's worth of hard physical and mental work by an ensemble of 14 performers led by CPT executive artistic director **Raymond Bobgan**.

Bobgan specializes in this sort of thing, having produced original adaptations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, "Summer and Smoke" and **plays by Gao Xingjian**.

As brilliant as those were, it is tempting now to say that "Open Mind Firmament" surpasses them all. But let's just say it is everything theater ought to be but so rarely is: revelatory.

Yeats, determined to write plays about Ireland's heroic age to

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compensate for what he saw as the portrayal of his countrymen as buffoons by other Irish playwrights, produced a six-play "Ulster Cycle," five about legendary Celtic hero **Cuchulain**.

None of these plays is staged today because their pure poetry makes them all but unplayable.

Bobgan and company mix excerpts of the plays and Yeats' muscular poetry, the subtle gestures of the **Japanese Noh theater** that fascinated Yeats, and the lectures and written works of Friedman (1935-2009).

The resulting swirl of words and actions -- moistened by water, heightened by ladders, shrouded in sheer scarves, and lighted in stark lights and darks by designer **Trad A Burns** -- is a dreamlike melange of playfully sensuous allures.

The story arc, if there is one, emerges from several directions and eventually builds itself into a meditation on the nature of the writer as hero of his own work, author of his own life and anticipator of his own death. Yeats is Cuchulain -- and so is Friedman.

The ensemble functions as an organic, protoplasmic whole that ebbs and flows and oozes on the Gordon Square arena stage. But it has four ringleaders.

Brett Keyser's Yeats has both dignity and mischief in his eye. **Chris Seibert** casts spells as **Cathbad** (the chief druid of Irish mythology) and as a blind seer. **Raymond McNiece** embodies Cuchulain's physical and poetic prowess. And John Stuehr haunts the sidelines as Friedman.

If you know little or nothing about Yeats and his work, just let the production pour over your senses, and afterward pick up one of the informative limited-edition programs (\$5) in the lobby, take it home and pore over it. Then go to the library and get some **actual Yeats** (the cast whispers some recommendations to the audience at the end of the show).

Yeats finished his wish for an "unpopular theater" by saying he also wanted "an audience like a secret society, where admission is by favor."

Do yourself a favor, experience "Open Mind Firmament" and become a member of Yeats' secret society.

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