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Cast of 'Epic' at Krannert just like family

MELISSA MERLI

URBANA – Thanksgiving came a couple of weeks early to East Central Illinois on Thursday evening with Ain Gordon's satirically accurate theater piece "Epic Family Epic, or The Hell Family Supper." In the hourlong play presented in the Studio Theatre at Krannert Center, Gordon's handpicked ensemble of seven deaf, hearing-impaired and hearing actors including himself and his mother, Valda Setterfield, deliver well-choreographed monologues and a little dialogue, much of it seemingly lifted from real family Thanksgiving feasts:

– "Oh, God, I'm on fire. You got any antacids?"

– "Who knew you colored your hair?"

– "Every year it's always the same thing."

And one of my favorites: "I feel guilty even though I'm dead."

Each actor represents multiple personalities from multiple generations nearly all the way back to the primordial ooze of life as Setterfield – a patrician-looking native of Great Britain – describes her "great-great-great-great-great ... grandmother" as a "faceless blob."

Portraying sets of Siamese twins including one that splits apart in the womb, deaf actress Anne Tomasetti and hearing actress Molly Powell – the standout among a group of polished performers – wear plush skirts and blouses covered in places by strips of Velcro, which allow them to stick together and at times pull violently apart.

Skilled, engaging and likeable, the performers and Gordon's clever script nail family interactions, frictions and the use and abuse of shared memories – or fractured family tales from the past. Adding another dimension was the use of American Sign Language by most of the cast as members translated or spoke their lines.

In the "Talkback" after the Thursday presentation, Gordon – he and his mother are both hearing – said he incorporated American Sign Language into "Epic Family Epic" after seeing someone off to the side sign a performance of one of his plays at the Dance Theater Workshop in New York.

"I thought, 'They can't possibly be over there, and that's gorgeous and it's virtuosic and it's going to upstage me,'" the Obie Award-winning playwright said. "I started to move them onstage. I found the language cross-resonated with my language and framed it and made it clearer. It made the text richer and more pictorial."

Powell, though, said "Epic Family Epic" is not a deaf play. It is destined, though,

to become a classic in the deaf community if it's not already. The Thursday performance I attended drew a member of the Illinois Association for the Deaf and a representative of the PACE Center for Independent Living, as well as a number of deaf theatergoers.

Although this description of Gordon's piece might make it seem cacophonous, the cast makes the complex script understandable.

"Epic Family Epic" is here for a three-day run, with the last performance scheduled for 7:30 tonight. Tickets are unavailable but if I were you, I'd get on the waiting list.

And I'll give away the very last line of the play here: "Happy Thanksgiving!"

If you go ...

What: Ain Gordon's "Epic Family Epic, or The Hell Family Supper."

When: 7:30 tonight.

Where: Studio Theatre, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, 500 S. Goodwin Ave., U.

Tickets: \$10 to \$25.

Information: 333-6280 or www.KrannertCenter.com.

Caption: B&W photo, Anne Tomasetti as Delia, and Molly Powell as her twin, Celia, in a scene from Ain Gordon's 'Epic Family Epic



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