

# Arts & Entertainment

## Haunting Secrets Revealed in Riveting New Play *Silver Dollar*

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

RAHWAY – Every family closet has skeletons. In Jared Kelner’s *Silver Dollar* that premiered mid-April at The Loft at Union County Performing Arts Center those closeted secrets have caused devastation in the lives within one family. The thought provoking one-act drama by Jared Kelner that was presented as a part of Fearless Productions is especially poignant because April is Child Abuse Prevention Month.

As strains of “Hello, Darkness, My Old Friend” play softly in the background during the pre-show, lights come up on a middle class family living room/dining room. Covering a dark blue loveseat is a colorful rag quilt that is patched together, just like the lives of the play’s characters – a wife, her husband and the man’s two brothers.

The men’s father was just buried. Lawrence (Brian Merrill) deals with the monumental event by slugging down drinks. Brother Wally (David Sussman), a mentally challenged man, repeatedly tells us, “Daddy was a bad boy.” He cradles his cloth pouch of shiny silver quarters that were given to him by their now absent mother. Wally, the truth teller, is adorably Rainman-like because he was hit in the head by a bat wielded by their other brother Donald (Jared Kelner). After the accident, Donald bolted from the household and hasn’t been seen or heard from for the last 18 years.

So when Donald shows up at Lawrence and wife Katherine (Katrina Sussman)’s house that they

shared with the father, he is greeted with a kaleidoscope of emotions: anger from Lawrence, shock from Kate and pure delight from Wally. Wally clearly loves this brother and treats him like he saw him just yesterday. Lawrence, however, is furious at his appearance and demands to know why he has returned after all this time. Katherine is flustered, self-conscious and clearly still in love with this man who was a onetime fiancé who left her at the altar. Some memories, like hovering ghosts, can’t move on to a better place. The play unearths dark secrets that need facing with honesty’s light.

Patches of perception, denial and finally truth are revealed in dialogue that is honest and raw.

All four actors were at the top of their game at the Sunday matinee show. The Talk Back following that performance gave information and insights about the production.

As with a rag patchwork quilt, edges are left unfinished. “It was my intention to leave the audience with more questions than answers,” Mr. Kelner told the audience. And he did. As in life, problems are not always solved. And this play is not a TV drama that is neatly sewn up in an hour.

Acting was a brand new experience for Ms. Sussman who merely accompanied her husband David to the audition. She was so good in reading the role that director/writer/actor Kelner asked her to take the part. For her first role onstage, she was amazing. Crying on cue isn’t always easy for veteran actors, so for her to do this, she was well directed and completely in tune with her natural talent.

As Wally, David Sussman played the role with understanding and compassion, not condescension. The fact that Mr. Kelner and Mr. Sussman look similar was an uncanny plus.

One question posed to Mr. Kelner asked how difficult was it to write, direct and act in one’s own production. “I wouldn’t recommend it!” he said laughing. “I videoed us as we got the scenes in hand and would watch them nightly. Then I’d write notes to the cast.”

Mr. Kelner believes playwriting is collaborative. He allows his actors to change lines. In fact, Lawrence’s character reacted differently in all three performances to a pivotal prop at the play’s end. Mr. Merrill said he didn’t plan those uniquely separate reactions, but let them evolve from the way his character was feeling during the performance.

“The audience is the final playwright,” Mr. Kelner explained. “I want them to create it in their minds.” This intriguing play does just that and does it memorably.



LOOKING ALERT...*The Drowsy Chaperone*, will open at CDC Theatre in Cranford in May. The last show of the theatre’s 97th season, winner of five Tony Awards, *The Drowsy Chaperone* is a loving send-up of the Jazz age musical featuring one show-stopping song and dance number after another. The show will run weekends from May 6 through May 21. Visit [www.cdctheatre.org](http://www.cdctheatre.org) for tickets and further information. Call (908) 276-7611 and ask about Group and Senior discounts.

## Alliance Repertory Theatre Gives Peace a Chance at Mondo in Summit

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SUMMIT – Despite John Lennon’s commitment to peace and love, officials in the Nixon administration and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover were determined to have the ex-Beatle deported by any means. Who knew? *Ears on a Beatle*, a play that opened last weekend at Mondo Theatre in Summit, is a two-person show by Mark St. Germain that spotlights questions Americans harbor about assassinations of world leaders and celebrities from Bobby Kennedy to John Lennon.

What is mere coincidence and what might be conspiracy? What are we, as Americans, willing to give up for National Security? Through the Freedom of Information Act, St. Germain has gathered intriguing information from audio tapes and files to make a play that isn’t necessarily a docudrama, but is pretty close to it.

Richard Nixon is about to run for re-election in 1972, but J. Edgar Hoover and the White House want to get peace-loving but politically outspoken John Lennon out of the country before the election. He’s just too popular and with his anti-war rhetoric,

he may persuade the young voters to revolt against the status quo.

Two FBI agents are charged to be on the team to follow the Beatle whom they always refer to as “the subject.” Special agent Howard Ballantine (the masterful Todd W. Jones) is a gum chewing older agent, who has previously worked high profile cases such as the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. He’s almost a stereotype of an old, by the book FBI agent – gruff, sarcastically cynical at times and married to his job which causes turmoil on the home front.

Ballantine’s paired with newbie Daniel McClure (talented Mitchell Leigh Gordon), a wet behind the ears rookie who leads with his heart, not his head. Without asking the agency’s permission, McClure adopts an undercover persona of a hippie – the exact opposite of the straight laced, suit and tie, trench coat wearing Ballantine. As might be predicted, throughout the play the two trade philosophies to bring about revelations about themselves and each other by the play’s end.

The two protagonists are everyday guys who share their relationship troubles, parenting problems, and other concerns that plague many of

us. They document and report on the life of someone else, so they understandably ask each other if the other ever feels that he’s not really living his own life. These men are bystanders to history, unable to effect change even when they want to do so.

“Don’t personalize the subject” is the mantra the men are supposed to embrace. That’s broken right away when McClure moves in with a gal who names herself “Peace,” one of the liberals who runs in circles with the Lennon fans. Ballantine’s own professional demeanor is compromised when he loses sight of the cardinal rule cited above. Later, McClure becomes hardened upon realizing that the heroes he idolizes might have clay feet.

Reportedly, playwright St. Germain interviewed former-agents involved in the Lennon case and used the Freedom of Information Act to unearth written documents and audio tapes for his research on the project of this play that was originally a 90-minute presentation without an intermission. The result is this dramatic stage production, presented by the Alliance Repertory Theatre under the artistic direction of Michael Driscoll, raises loads of speculation. The theater ex-

perience is energized by Lennon’s icon music featured in pre and post show and during intermission and voice overs of news reports from the time period.

Riveting, authentic performances from Mr. Jones and Mr. Gordon make this fast-paced, well directed show come to life. The stereotypes are long forgotten as the acting duo digs for the humanity in each character. In the intimate theater of Mondo, each raised eyebrow, furrowed brow and smirk play well. The shouting match between the agents is breathtaking—theater at its engaging best.

Bravo to director Joseph Porter who has taken the audience on a journey to a time of paranoia, war, dirty politics, government malfeasance, political espionage, wiretapping...wait. Are we talking about the 1970s or today?

The show runs through the weekend of April 21, 22, 23 at 8 p.m. For tickets, call (908) 472-1502 or visit [www.alliancereper.org](http://www.alliancereper.org).

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