

## Woke White People Behaving Badly: *The Thanksgiving Play* at 4th Wall Theatre Company

[D. L. Groover](#) March 9, 2024 9:11AM



(L-R) Alicia Beard, Santry Rush, Brandon Hearnberger and Faith Fossett in *The Thanksgiving Play* at 4th Wall Theatre Company. Photo by Gabriella Nissen

We can all give thanks to 4th Wall Theatre Company for bringing us Larissa FastHorse's wicked satire, *The Thanksgiving Play* (2017). That American holiday will never be the same.

The humor is quick and barbed, as it dissects not only the myth of that first Thanksgiving in Plymouth Colony but also the myth of theater storytelling, and who gets to tell the story. It's also a brutal takedown of pervasive progressiveness and may leave you a bit shaken after the laughs subside. Crisply directed by Philip Lehl, who knows where all the laugh lines lie, and wonderfully acted by a well-honed quartet, this is grand theater – thought provoking and funny as hell.

Logan (an expertly exasperated Faith Fossett) teaches high school drama. She's even been to L.A. to make her fortune but lasted six weeks. Armed with a “Native American Heritage Month Awareness-Through-Art Grant,” she's producing a play for elementary schools about that first Thanksgiving.

She gathers her friend Jaxton (Brandon Hearnberger, all-sensitive vegan ally), a street performer and yoga practitioner deluxe; Caden (Santry Rush), a sad-sack playwright manqué whose only works have been performed by children, is hired to be the dramaturg (whatever that means, he concedes); and the airhead Alicia

(Alicia Beard, in a sparkling 4th Wall debut), an L.A. actress hired by Logan because she believes her to be native American. She's authentic, they rhapsodize, so all three kowtow to her, give her space to be, and make fools of themselves by doing so. Except for Alicia, the three are wildly “woke,” oversensitive to everyone's feelings, and trying terribly hard not to offend. That they do offend, insanely, is only the first of many through-line jokes.

By the way, it doesn't take long for red-headed Logan to realize that Alicia is no more native American than she is. Alicia has no problem playing other nationalities. Cultural appropriation has never entered her lexicon. Why should it? Whenever she plays a role, people pay her for it. See, how simple. It's just pretending. Anyway, Lumiere in *Beauty and the Beast* wasn't a real candlestick, was he? She's serious. She doesn't bother with cultural buzzwords, she just wants more lines. “I know how to make people look at me...I'll act my ass off.” Of course, the joke is that she's a very bad actress but a very good looker. She was the third understudy for Jasmine at Disneyland, so she knows things.

As the rehearsals progress – or digress – events go very knotty, very fast. How can they portray the Indians without an Indian in the cast? That would be red-face. Caden wants to begin the play thousands of years ago with a fire center stage. That's an immediate no from Logan. They improvise the first banquet with pie from the oven and corn on the cob, miming eating like typewriters. Another no. They play a scene with the Indians at the table, then think better of it and make them invisible. That certainly doesn't work. Jaxton wants conflict, so he and Caden work up the story of the Pequot massacre. Blood is spilled on the whiteboard and drizzled on the floor. Fake Indian heads are punted around like soccer balls. No, no, no.

Logan is beside herself, knowing that the parents' petition to have her fired after her kiddie production of *The Iceman Cometh* dangles precariously over her career. Caden tries repeatedly and clumsily to put the make on Alicia, who zones out by staring at the ceiling. (Which Beard does so with frightening clarity, which only brings more laughs.) Jaxton is constantly doing his yoga poses while spouting platitudes about gender neutrality or other inanities. He boasts that he went a year as “they/them.”

Interspersed with the failed rehearsals are recreations of actual Thanksgiving pageants that have been shown on YouTube or Zoom from schools around the country. These are the most frightening, and where FastHorse dips her pen in bleak irony to explain her play's not-so-subtle subtext. Elementary kids sing about the nine gifts that the Indians “gave” to the Pilgrims, like pumpkins in a patch, teepees, and moccasins, sung to “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Or the fifth grade show where turkeys are shot indiscriminately and the class sings about an Indian who commits suicide. “And then there were none.” It's brutally funny until it's not.

While these four “hold space for one another,” acknowledge their white privilege, and defer plenty of room for pronouns and “centering,” the native Americans are entirely erased. Logan's solution for her holiday production is a fine kicker to end *The Thanksgiving Play*. It's theater of the absurd. But the laughs are on us.

*The Thanksgiving Play continues through March 24 at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Monday March 18; 3 p.m. Sundays at 4th Wall Theatre Company, Spring Street Studios, 1824 Spring Street. For more information, call 832-767-4991 or visit [4thwalltheatreco.com](http://4thwalltheatreco.com). \$28-\$63.*



D.L. Groover has contributed to countless reputable publications including the *Houston Press* since 2003. His theater criticism has earned him a national award from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN) as well as three statewide Lone Star Press Awards for the same. He's co-author of the irreverent appreciation, *Skeletons from the Opera Closet* (St. Martin's Press), now in its fourth printing.

**Contact:** [D. L. Groover](mailto:D.L.Groover)