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## **Chicago Joins in Austen Mania** ***"Austenland" comes to the movies,*** ***the U.S, premiere of a Northanger Abbey adaptation*** ***comes to the stage***

### **An interview with a man who dares to adapt Jane Austen's works**

Jane Austen is everywhere these days. In this bicentennial of her *Pride and Prejudice*, the British have put her on a postage stamp and announced that in 2017 her portrait will grace their ten-pound note. *Austenland*, a new movie with Keri Russell as an obsessive fan, will arrive in Chicago later this month

Austen followers are everywhere as well. The devotion of her enthusiasts is legendary, something Remy Bumpo Theatre will be dealing with when it brings perhaps the least well-known of Austen's novels, *Northanger Abbey*, to the stage this fall.

Englishman Tim Luscombe has adapted three Jane Austen novels for the stage, and has yet to be assaulted by any audience members who felt he didn't present the much-adored Austen's work as precisely as he should have. Then again, Luscombe's Austen plays have yet to be performed in the United States, where we tend to take royalty, literary or otherwise, much more reverently than do the British.

That will change in October, when Remy Bumpo presents the North American premiere of Luscombe's adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*. It was the first of Austen's works that he tackled, initially performed in England's York Theatre Royal in 2004. He has since also interpreted *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*.

Hallowed though Austen may be, and how much he admires her work himself, Luscombe's decision to try to convert her novels to stage wasn't strictly a matter of adoration. He had written several original plays without much commercial success, and his agent suggested he adapt something really saleable, such as Charles Dickens or Austen. Feeling the need to eat, he gave it a shot.

There had just been a major Dickens tour in Britain, so Luscombe opted for Austen. "I didn't want to do *Pride*

and *Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility* because they had been done so often and so well, and quite recently at the time," he says, citing stage, film and television versions. Instead he tackled the lesser-known *Northanger Abbey*, a shorter novel Austen wrote early in her career, but which wasn't published until a few months after her death in 1817.

"*Northanger* struck me as incredibly theatrical," Luscombe said in an interview from his home in Berlin. He says the most difficult problem when adapting Austen's works is that the novels rely so much on revelations of what a character, especially the heroine, is thinking, and watching a character think usually doesn't make for very interesting theatre.

Fortunately, in the case of *Northanger*, heroine Catherine's thoughts tend to be vivid images inspired by *Udolpho*, one of the gothic novels she loves to read. This allowed creation of scenes full of color and action, even while dealing with introspection. Luscombe feels that also made it possible to capture the *joie de vivre* Catherine shares with other Austen heroines.

So far, Luscombe's system has worked. "Nobody has said, 'I wish you had included X.' or, 'They're holding the teacups in a way that Jane would never have had them do.' Maybe they're afraid of me," he says.

Then, again, his adaptations have yet to meet the reverential American audience. Austen may be going on currency in Britain, but she's on many a pedestal here.

American Austenites will get their chance to judge Luscombe's interpretation when Joanie Schultz (*The Whale*) directs Remy Bumppo's production of *Northanger Abbey* at the Greenhouse Theater Center at 2257 N. Lincoln Ave., beginning October 2. Tickets to and more information about the North American premiere are available through [www.remybumppo.org](http://www.remybumppo.org) or by calling the Greenhouse at 773-404-7336.



Tim Luscombe

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