

# ENTERTAINMENT

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## Three men bound by a passion for ideas

By Jeffrey Borak  
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LENOX — On the surface, David Egan's smart, if uneven, play, "The Fly-Bottle," is about passion — the passion for ideas. In fact, "The Fly-Bottle," which is being given an invigorating world premiere in Shakespeare & Company's Spring Lawn Theatre, is about the human dimension of intellect; the connections between ideas and the minds from which ideas spring; ultimately, about the draining toll passion, brilliance, genius can exert. If the human dimension of Egan's story isn't as satisfyingly developed as the intellectual dimension, it isn't for want of trying.

The starting point for "The Fly-Bottle" — which first surfaced as a one-act play last October at Mass MoCA — is the true-life encounter one October evening in 1946 at Cambridge University's Moral Science Club to which philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who chaired the club, had invited Karl Popper to address the group. While eyewitness accounts of Wittgenstein and Popper's first-ever meeting vary, there is general agreement that a poker was involved.

In a play about two philosophers who had opposing views on how one can know anything for certainty, Egan tells this story from three viewpoints — Popper's, Wittgenstein's and mathematician-philosopher Bertrand Russell, who witnesses the encounter and is seen in a variety of ways — a third party eager to avoid becoming involved; a fatherly and sympathetic adviser to Popper; and as colleague and spiritual consultant to Wittgenstein.

Egan has taken on a Herculean task, and for the most part he succeeds in turning a wealth of potentially dry academic material into a generally bracing evening of theater.

Under Tina Packer's lean, incisive direction, Popper (Dave Demke) and Wittgenstein (Michael Hammond) have at each other vigorously and insistently — Popper with smug self-satisfaction; Wittgenstein with a range of feeling and purpose that is far more complex and intricate.

It is in that complexity and intricacy that "The Fly-Bottle" is at its most affecting and promising, particularly given Hammond's galvanic, richly nuanced performance.

For most of "The Fly-Bottle," Egan is content to describe behavior as the debate between and among Popper, Wittgenstein and Russell (Dennis Krausnick) rages on. It is not until Egan gets beneath the surface — an endearing, witty scene in which Russell, played by Krausnick at this point



Shakespeare & Company/Kevin Sprague

A controversial encounter involving rival philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein (Michael Hammond, left) and Karl Popper (Dave Demke, right), and a poker is at the center of "The Fly-Bottle," a new play by David Egan that is having its world premiere in Shakespeare & Company's Spring Lawn Theatre.

### Theater Review

**THE FLY-BOTTLE.** A play by David Egan (performed without intermission). Directed by Tina Packer; scenic designer, Bob Lohbauer; costume designer, Govane Lohbauer; lighting designer, Nathan Towne-Smith; sound designer, Richard B. Ingraham. In repertory, through Aug. 24. Shakespeare & Company, Spring Lawn Theatre, 70 Kemble St., Lenox. 637-3353. 1 hour 35 minutes

Ludwig Wittgenstein.....Michael Hammond  
Karl Popper.....Dave Demke  
Bertrand Russell.....Dennis Krausnick

with a kind of childlike glee and mischief, offers the proper Popper his theory on the role of sex in fashioning the intellectual life; and two prolonged, deeply affecting scenes between Russell and Wittgenstein — that "The Fly-Bottle" strikes at the heart of the play's emotional issues and starts down a path Egan is unwilling to follow to its end.

As played by Hammond, Wittgenstein emerges as the evening's most fascinating character, a man deeply rooted in his belief in the limitations of what we can know; how language defines those limitations. Frustration roils within him. "We become unable to feel anything our intellect doesn't sense," he tells a fantasy Russell whom Wittgenstein summons up while sitting in a movie theater. Russell, in their early days together as teacher and student, is caught by Wittgenstein's brilliance. "He

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[Wittgenstein] absorbed everything I had to teach him," Russell says admiringly, "and then turned it on its head."

Later, the fantasy Russell ruefully asks Wittgenstein "What does one do when one has a gift and the gift slips away?" It's a question Russell is posing as much to himself as he is to Wittgenstein.

Krausnick moves unsteadily through the evening. His halting rhythm at the weekend performance I saw as often as not seemed to have more to do with uncertainty over lines than with a character's deliberation. Yet, when Krausnick is on — as he is in the aforementioned playful scene with Demke's Popper and, later, in his two extended scenes with Hammond's Wittgenstein — his work is remarkably revealing and adroit.

As Popper, Demke succeeds admirably in giving dimension to

the play's least developed, perhaps most enigmatic, character.

"The Fly-Bottle" draws its title from the beer bottles bartenders in Vienna used to place on the floor behind the bar to capture flies. The flies were drawn into the bottle by the remnants of beer intentionally left by the bartender as a lure. Once inside, the flies, seeing the world outside from inside, try to find their way back out but can't. "Philosophy," Wittgenstein says, "is a fly-bottle. We are drawn in by the sweet scent of the truth. We are sealed off from the rest of the world and cannot find our way out." In drawing us into the world of Russell, Popper and Wittgenstein, Egan offers intriguing intellectual lure. Leading us to the human truths on the outside, however, is another matter entirely.

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