

'Ben' There

BY G.K. SHARMAN

Garden Theatre's production aims to trim epic tale down to size.

Move over, Charlton Heston. There's a new charioteer in town, and he's sporting a lot more horsepower.

Or maybe a lot less, depending on what Jason Horne and Joe Walsh figured out for the Garden Theatre's Feb. 28-March 15 production of *Ben Hur*.

That's because they're not doing that *Ben Hur* — the serious drama with the cast of thousands and the most-celebrated chariot race on celluloid.

Their production is just the tiniest bit smaller — four actors total, all playing a variety of roles — and a lot less serious.

Ridiculous, outlandish and over the top, the play within a play centers on a troupe of community theater actors whose behind-the-scenes rivalries and romances overshadow the main drama.

"The punch line is about how poorly these four people are performing *Ben Hur*," says Horne, the play's director.

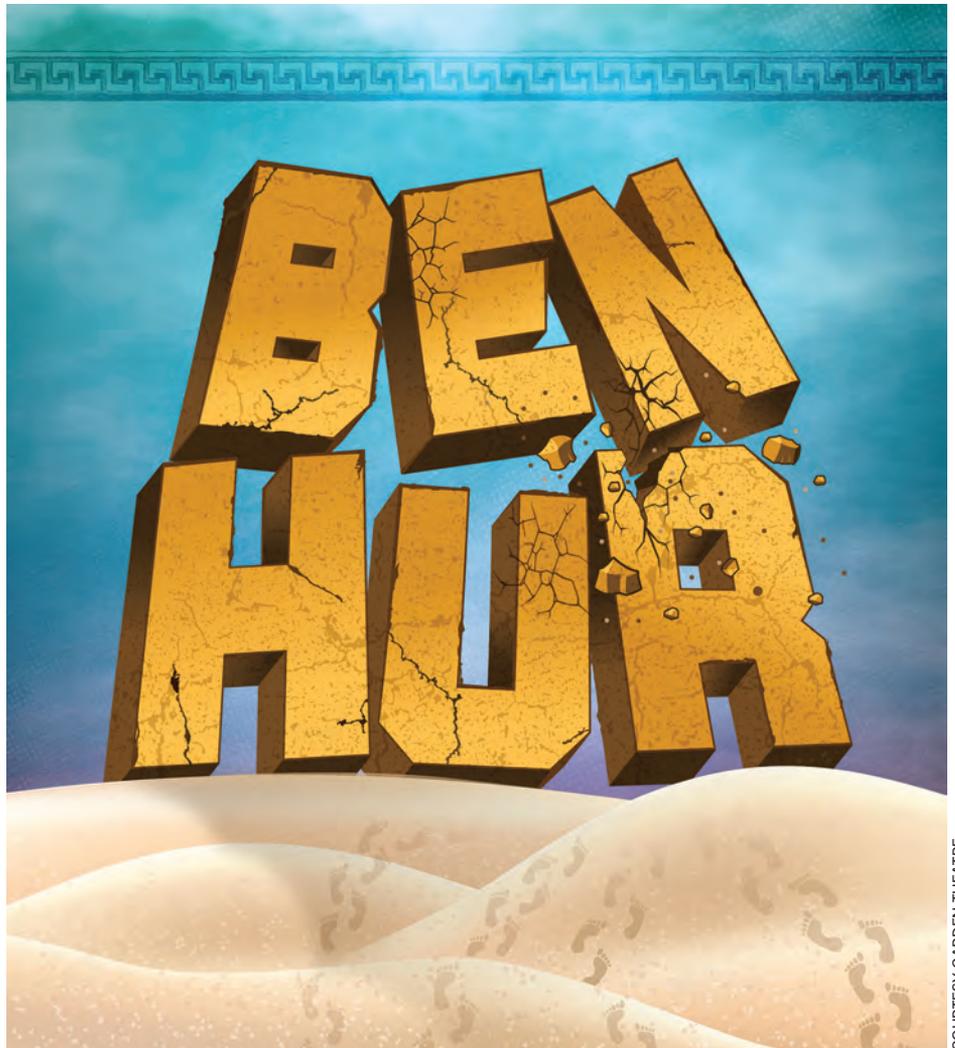
The brainchild of playwright and spoof-master Patrick Barlow, the play has been staged with everything from tricycles to lawn mowers. The only sure bet: no horses, Horne promises, but "whatever fits our chariot race the best."

Actor TJ Washburn can't wait to step into Heston's footprints.

"I've taken quite a bit of time away from theater to concentrate on other endeavors, so it's exciting just to be working on a play again, especially one this funny," he says. "It's even more exciting I get to do that at the Garden — where I've never worked, but about which I've heard some really cool things — and with Jason, for whom I have so much affection and respect."

The production is the first at the theater for Horne, show director of Creative Development, Art and Design at Universal Orlando Resort.

"We're so thrilled that's he's coming to do this production with us," says Walsh, the theater's artistic director.



COURTESY GARDEN THEATRE

"This show is just lighthearted fun, and it seemed like the perfect play for the end of the winter season and beginning of summer. It's just a great story to share with the audience."

The show really is suitable for general audiences, Walsh maintains, and is a production that anyone can enjoy and appreciate. However, there is some mature language.

"We have such a rich theatrical community here," he says. "Before I came

here, I was really drawn to the diversity of the programming. We like to do titles that get people talking, and make people think. That's our job as a theater — to find the most interesting pieces we can share with community."

For additional information on the show and to purchase tickets, visit gardentheatre.org.

G.K. Sharman is a freelance writer living in Sanford, Florida.