

Sharon Gopfert and Scott Rowe star in "Night Battles."

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HOME GROWN: Lookingglass Theatre ensemble member Thom Cox, most recently seen in the one-man show "Nelson Algren: For Keeps and a Single Day," turns his attention to directing with Piven Theatre's American Voices. Six short stories by a diverse group of American authors are translated for the stage: "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" by Ernest Hemingway, "Jaguar Jesus" by Warren Leight, "The Gilded Six-Bits" by Zora Neale Hurston, "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway, "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver and "What Denny Brown Didn't Know at Age Fifteen" by Elizabeth Gilbert. Performances continue through May 13 at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes, Evanston. Tickets: (847) 866-8049.

AT LIVE BAIT: Donald Gecewicz's Night Battles, a drama inspired by Carlo Ginzburg's historical classic about witchcraft and the Inquisition, begins free preview performances Thursday at Live Bait Theater, 3914 N. Clark. Set in late 14th-century Venice, when the city was at the summit of its power and allure, it tells of the trials of the Benandanti, people whose souls leave their bodies four times a year to fight against witches and warlocks to guard the safety of their crops, vineyards and livestock. Joe Gerrits, Sharon Gopfert, Greg Hardin, Steven F. McClain, Scott Rowe and Alida Vitas star; Susan Leigh directs. Opening night is April 22. Tickets: (773) 871-1212.

AT APPLE TREE: David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning M. Butterfly will be the next production staged at Apple Tree Theatre. The drama tells the tale of French diplomat Rene Gallimard (Dev Kennedy), who falls prey to the delicate charms of Chinese opera star Song Liling (E.Y. Shin). As the love affair draws out over 20 years, it draws parallels to Puccini's "Madame Butterfly." Peter Amster directs. Previews begin Wednesday, with opening night set for April 25 at Apple Tree Theatre, 595 Elm, Highland Park. Tickets: (847) 432-4335.

ODDS & ENDS: The Actors Gymnasium is in residence through Sept. 9 at the Museum of Science and Industry. In conjunction with the exhibit "Under the Big Top," the circus and performing arts school will conduct classes in full view of the public. For more information, call (847) 328-2795. . . . Kent Alexander performs Zulu Pet, a six-character work with universal themes. At 7 tonight and Saturday night, Pulaski Park Theater, 1419 W. Blackhawk. Tickets: (773) 772-7248. . . . Salt Creek Ballet presents Carnival of the Animals and More, a program for all ages featuring guest dancers from the Bolshoi and Colorado Ballets. At 1 p.m. Saturday, Norris Center for the Cultural Arts, 1040 Dunham, St. Charles (630-584-7200); 7:30 p.m. April 28 and 2 p.m. April 29, McAninch Arts Center, College of DuPage, 425 22nd, Glen Ellyn (630-942-4000); 3 p.m. May 6, Governors State University, Center for the Performing Arts, Governors Hwy. and University Pkwy., University Park (708-235-2222).

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