The American Century Theater presents

Visit to a Small Planet
by Gore Vidal

ON STAGE
About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to presenting great, important, and worthy American plays of the twentieth century—what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender the moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins, and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

The American Century Theater presents

Visit to a Small Planet
by Gore Vidal

July 8–August 6, 2011

Gunston Theatre Two
2700 South Lang Street, Arlington

Producer
Genie Baskir

Director
Rip Claassen

Stage Manager
Charles Dragonette

Sound Design
Ed Moser

Set Design
Noel Greer

Lighting Design
Micah Stromberg

Costume Design
Rosalie Ferris

Properties Design
Ceci Albert

The action of the play takes place in the house of Roger Spelding outside Manassas, Virginia. The time is summer, 1958.

Act I
Early evening of a summer’s day

Act II
Scene I The next morning
Scene II That evening

Act III
An hour later

There will be two intermissions.

Please—Silence and stow cell phones and other distracting devices. The use of recording equipment and taking of photographs during the performance are strictly prohibited.

Visit to a Small Planet is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.

Gore Vidal’s Visit to a Small Planet is funded in part by Arlington County through the Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources, and the Arlington Commission for the Arts.

This arts event is made possible in part by the Virginia Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and our many generous donors.

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Visit to a Small Plant by Gore Vidal (1957)

When *Visit to a Small Planet* was made into a movie, the role of the space alien who blunders into the 1950s community of Manassas, Virginia was cast with Jerry Lewis, and Gore Vidal knew 1) his clever satire about America’s fondness for war and TV, as well as the foolishness of its illusions of sophistication, was doomed to be transformed into a slapstick romp suitable for 10-year-olds, and 2) he never again wanted to write another play and see it debased by Hollywood.

Vidal had good reason to be resentful: though the celebrated wit, social commentator, and novelist regarded *Visit* as one of his favorite creations, its association with the madcap Lewis would guarantee near obscurity for his stage comedy, a success on Broadway in 1957. The play’s lead character of Kreton, the space visitor, could not have been less Lewis-like, though Vidal’s name for him has to share some blame for giving the film producers the idea of casting Jerry. Kreton was played on stage by the cultured British actor Cyril Richard, who is best remembered today as the suavely villainous Captain Hook in the annual television productions of *Peter Pan* starring Mary Martin. Richard also directed the Broadway production of *Visit to a Small Planet* and was nominated for a Tony for his work.

Richard’s understudy was also a renowned Brit whose comic style was miles removed from Lewis’s—Martyn Green, the principal patter baritone of London’s D’Oyly Carte Opera company and arguably the definitive interpreter of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic characters like Ko-Ko in *The Mikado* and Sir Joseph Porter in *H.M.S. Pinafore*. But the image of Jerry Lewis haunted *Visit to a Small Planet* and made it seem sophomoric, guaranteeing that most theaters gave as much consideration to reviving Gore Vidal’s favorite comedy as they woul to a stage mounting of *The Nutty Professor*.

Yet Vidal’s creation had wide-ranging cultural influence, especially on television, where the play had been born as a live TV teleplay. Kreton’s habit of using his alien powers to move and influence people and things inspired television comedies with similarly endowed characters, like *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, the latter being only a slightly disguised version of *Visit*, with a change of gender and a bottle replacing the flying saucer. The third of these magical-character-disrupts-suburbia shows was a direct steal—*My Favorite Martian*, with the space visitor returning to Cyril Richard-style dignity, as played by Broadway veteran Ray Walston. Years later, it was back to the Lewis...
version, this time with the new generation's wacko, Robin Williams, as Kreton but called "Mork" instead, in a Happy Days spin-off called Mork and Mindy.

As a final tribute, Gene Roddenberry borrowed the ending of Vidal's play as the surprise resolution of one of Star Trek's earliest and most memorable episodes. Trekkies will recognize it instantly.

Yes, Visit to a Small Planet, high-quality comedy that it is, deserved a better fate than being lumped together with Cinderella, The Bellboy, and other Jerry Lewis mug-fests. Yet like all sturdy and original inspirations, Gore Vidal's idea that a visitor from the stars looking at Earthlings with fresh and innocent eyes would create a wealth of comic, satiric, and dramatic situations has been borne out spectacularly in the many versions and adaptations his Visit spawned. It was that true rarity, a Broadway comedy with lasting cultural impact. Gore Vidal should forget about Jerry Lewis and be proud of devising an idea that has generated a million laughs . . . and a lot of insight, too.

—Jack Marshall, Artistic Director

Director's Notes

My love affair with Visit to a Small Planet began back in the summer of 1976, when this then-14-year-old theatre geek discovered the script at the Post library. Now in 2010 I finally get to direct it.

What has always drawn me to this script is how honestly it pokes fun at our society. Over fifty years after it was originally presented, it is still as fresh as ever. The show started a movement of spacemen as commentators on our society—My Favorite Martian, Mork and Mindy, Third Rock from the Sun, some Star Trek episodes, and Dr. Who all owe Visit a debt. Mr. Vidal gives us a peek at ourselves that as well as being funny is though provoking.

Please join me and the Spelding family for a visit . . .

—Rip Claassen, Director

The Director dedicates this production to the memory of Rusty Claus, in thanks for the contributions she made to the D.C. theatre community. We miss you, Rusty!

Cast

Noah Bird (Conrad Mayberry) studied theater most recently at Howard Community College, with Casi Campbell and Jenny Male. He has recognitions in Unarmed and Quarterstaff for stage combat. Favorite roles include Dead Body Boy (Temp Odyssey), King Shahariyar (1001), and Slightly Soiled (Peter Pan).

Kecia A. Campbell (Maid/Technician 1) has been seen in the Washington–Baltimore metro area as Queen Factor in Princess Problem It's Time To Wed (Studio Theatre/DC Black Theatre Festival), Mistress Ford in The Merry Wives of Windsor (Vpstart Crow), Elizabeth in The Old Settler (African Continuum Theatre), Hyattsville in Bunny, Bunny (Source Festival), Diana in Betty's Wish and Pretty in Dancing Without You (Kennedy Center Page-to-Stage), and Mrs. Mi Tzu in The Good Woman of Setzuan (Theatre Lab). She trained with Vera Katz, The Theatre Lab, and Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory.

Kelly Cronenberg (Reba Spelding) is a graduate of the Honors Conservatory at The Theatre Lab. Her professional credits include Lucio in an all-female production of Measure for Measure.

Megan Graves (Ellen Spelding) is returning to The American Century Theater, having appeared there in Life with Father and Native Son. Other area credits include Eight (Capital Fringe Festival), Arcadia (u/s, performed; Folger Theatre), Noises Off (Ohrstrom-Bryant Theatre), and Othello and Cinderella: The World's Favorite Fairy Tale (Glaize Studio Theatre). She holds a B.F.A. from Shenandoah Conservatory.

Brendan Haley (Aide) was last seen at The American Century Theater as the Older Kessler Boy in Tenth Man and worked backstage as Production Intern on the TACT production of Seascape. He also appeared in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? at the Blacksburg Summer Arts Festival. Brendan is a graduate of Virginia Tech’s Theatre Arts and Cinema program.

Peter Louis Johnson (Technician 2) has been acting on stage and in film since 1997 and has performed a wide variety of roles, from Gregory Thomas in the world premiere cast of The Kitchen Madonna to Clarion the Clown in Life Is a Dream. His background in improvisational comedy has enabled him to found and direct two comedy teams. This is his first production with The American Century Theater.

Steve Lebens (Roger Spelding) has appeared with The American Century Theater in Stage Door, Babes in Arms, Stalag 17, Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?, An American Century Christmas, Hellzapoppin’, Drama under the Influence, and Call Me Mister. Other theater credits: The Entertainer (Guthrie Theater); Why Torture Is Wrong (American Ensemble Theater); A Clockwork Orange, Hot Fudge, The Virgin Molly, and Muzeeka (Studio Secondstage); Cabaret and Passion (Signature Theatre), The Merchant of Venice and Casing Juliet Playing Othello (Folger Theatre), Moscow (Ganymede Arts), War of the Worlds and The Supper (Scena Theatre), and K2, Walk in the Woods, and Three Sisters (Theater of the Americas). Film: Browncoats Redemption. Television: Law and Order: Criminal Intent, C-47, and El Amor Es Mas Fuerte.

Bruce Alan Rauscher (Kreon) has worked with many area theatres, among them The American Century Theater, Washington Shakespeare Company,

**Tamra Lynn Testerman** (Delton 4) last appeared at The American Century Theater as Nora in *Life with Father*. She is a member of The Barrow Group Theatre Company in New York City. Theatre credits include: Penny in *Dead Right*, Warrior in *Musical Chairs*, Trudy and Crow in *All We Ask*, Dada in *The A Train*, and Delia in *Tanjoran* (The Barrow Group), and Kate in *The Misfortune of Kings* (Bonifant Theatre). She trained with the Studio Theatre, National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts, Seth Barrish, and Vera Katz.

**John Tweel** (General Tom Powers) has appeared at The American Century Theater in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, *The Titans, Hellzapoppin*, *Emperor Jones*, and *Moby Dick Rehearsed*. He was most recently seen in *The 8-Team* (Landless Theatre Company) and has also appeared locally in *War of the Worlds*, *Sink the Belgrano*, and *The Trial* (Scena Theatre); *Scenes from the Big Picture* (Helen Hayes nomination for Outstanding Ensemble, Resident Production) and *Improbable Frequency* (Solas Nua); *A Flea in Her Ear*, *CrazyFace*, and *The Arabian Nights* (Constellation Theatre); *1776* (Olney Theatre Center); *Roundheads and Peakheads*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Ensemble, Resident Production) and *The Elephant Man* (Catalyst Theater); *A Walk across the Rooftops* and *Marat/Sade* (Washington Shakespeare Company); *The Gospel According to Fishman* (Signature Theatre); and *The Power of the Dog* and the Scottish Play (Longacre Lea Productions). Film: *America’s Most Wanted*, *Wedding Crashers*, and *Syriana*.

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**Production Staff**

**Rip Claassen** (Director) has taught theatre and acting at the Institute for the Arts for Fairfax County Public Schools, Duke Ellington School of the Arts, and other local theatre programs. For The American Century Theater, he has directed (*Life with Father*), coproduced (*Native Son*), and costumed innumerable shows. Rip founded the Northern Virginia Theatre Festival for high schools and provides coaching to theatre students seeking roles or admission to competitive theatre programs. He is Artistic Director of Teens and Theatre (TnT), a nonprofit educational theatre company.

**Genie Baskir** (Producer) is making her producing debut with The American Century Theater on *Visit to a Small Planet*. She made a career in radio before coming to the theatre in support of her daughter and husband.

**Ceci Albert** (Properties Designer) is working her fourth production with The American Century Theater, where she previously supported *Life with Father*, *A Piece of My Heart*, and *Stalag 17*. She works extensively with St. Mark’s Players and has also supported productions of *Joseph* (The Arlington Players) and *Saturday, Sunday, Monday* and *Scapino* (Little Theater of Alexandria).

**Geoff Baskir** (Stagehand) is a sometime actor and theatre hobbyist.

**Charles Dragonette** (Stage Manager) has specialized in being neither seen nor heard. Television: *Featured Analyst, Return of the Pirates* (The History Channel).

**Rosalie Ferris** (Costume Designer) is a Canadian costume designer and seamstress volunteering with The American Century Theater. She is studying costume design in Nova Scotia.

**G.W. Glover** (Assistant Stage Manager) is backstage for his third production with The American Century Theater, having worked as Assistant Stage Manager on *Stage Door* and spotlight operator for *One Night with Fannie Brice*.

**Noel Greer** (Scenic Designer/Master Carpenter) is pleased to be working on his first design for The American Century Theater, having previously worked with TACT as a carpenter and electrician. Other design work includes *Hamlet* and *Crimes of the Heart* (Firebelly Productions) and productions for Traveling Players Ensemble and the Holton-Arms School. A graduate of George Mason University with a B.A. in Theatre, Noel can be found in numerous theaters in the metropolitan area working as a wandering scene shop carpenter.

**Chanukah Jane Lilburne** (Wardrobe Mistress) is a singer, dancer, and actress. She is studying to be a theatrical hair and makeup designer.

**Ed Moser** (Sound Designer) is returning to The American Century Theater after designing sound for TACT’s *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter*? and *Native Son*. Recent designs include *Port Authority* and *Master Harold and the Boys* (Quotidian Theatre), *Amelia* (Kennedy Center’s Page-to-Stage festival), Paul Morella’s *A Christmas Carol*, and *Herbie: Poet of the Wild West* (Doorways Arts Ensemble). Favorite musical credits include *Senior Discretion Himself* (Arena Stage), *Urinetown* (University of Maryland), *David in Shadow and Light* (Theater J), and *Godspell* (Olney Theatre Center).

**Micah Stromberg** (Lighting Designer) is currently the Venue Technical Director at George Mason University and Production Manager and Resident Lighting Designer for the Virginia Ballet.
Thank you to the many generous donors who provided support from July 1, 2010 through June 15, 2011.

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