

ARTS & LIVING



"The Unfair Advantage" is by Australian magician Harry Milas in Steppenwolf Theatre's Merle Reskin Garage Space. DAVID HILL

REVIEW 'THE UNFAIR ADVANTAGE' ★★★½

Magician Harry Milas makes cards bend to his will

By Chris Jones
Chicago Tribune

At the beginning of "The Unfair Advantage," a fascinating little experience in the Steppenwolf Garage space featuring the young Australian card sharp Harry Milas, you are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, including an assertion that you will not use any of the knowledge gained from the show to rip off your local casino or, more likely, your regular Monday night poker game with your pals.

It's mostly a gimmick, but a very savvy one, given that Milas promises in his promotional materials to teach you how to do some nefarious things with a deck of 52 cards, thus gaining the benefit of his own years of practice with deuces, aces and second-card deals, not to mention his prior employment as a guy who walked around casinos and watched out for any shenanigans coming from either dealers or

players.

Does he deliver? To some extent, yes, although Milas really is a highly skilled close-up magician who well knows that he has to walk a fine line here between offering up insider information, for which his audience is clearly hungry, and giving away the secrets of card tricks, a no-no in the magic world and something likely to subject him to considerable opprobrium from his peers, especially in this magic-obsessed town. So he makes a sharp distinction: he tells us he is willing to give away some *gambling* secrets but not *magic* secrets. At least, not to any great degree.

Moreover, this guy is so skilled with his 52 assistants — to nod to Rickie Jay who also appeared once on Steppenwolf real estate — you'll struggle to apply any of Milas' actions yourself. He's just too good.

His fake deals are flawless; the speed with which he can memo-

rize the order of an entire deck is a sight to behold and his phony shuffles, of all varieties, are beyond compare (and I've seen a few in my time). Aside from the cheating and trickery, the show also contains a lot of truly fascinating material related to mnemonics, the science of training your memory. In the question-and-answer section that concluded on Tuesday night, Milas said that he uses 52 rooms inside his old high school to situate each card in his head, allowing him to locate any diamond he wishes in any pack of Bicycles.

Suffice to say here that poker players, blackjack lovers, memory fiends and fans of old-school card tricks will be in seventh heaven here and will both love the intimacy of this parlor-like experience (there are multiple nightly shows and audience for each is limited to less than 50) and also recognize the quality of Milas' work. He's yet another former student of the

late Chicago magic guru Eugene Burger, whose obituary I wrote in 2017, and who would surely be proud more of Milas' sophisticated, often improvised storytelling and his embrace of weighty themes than his inestimably clever flicks of his fingers.

But you can meet this guy wherever you may land and, as someone who sees a lot of magic, I can say with confidence that you will not have seen anything quite like this. Some people around me Tuesday provided a veritable soundtrack of gurgles of amazement.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.
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When: Through April 21
Where: Merle Reskin Garage, 1624 N. Halsted St.
Running time: 1 hour (plus optional 20 minutes of questions)
Tickets: \$70-\$85 at unfairadvantage.show

Helen Hunt, 'Inherit the Wind' and 'Color Purple' are all part of Goodman Theatre 2024-25 season

By Chris Jones
Chicago Tribune

A new production of Harold Pinter's "Betrayal" starring Helen Hunt, a staging of "The Color Purple" and a revival of the American classic "Inherit the Wind," perhaps with Broadway aspirations, are all part of the Goodman Theatre's 2024-25 season, announced Wednesday by the theater's new artistic director Susan Booth.

The mainstage Albert Theatre season begins in the fall with "Inherit the Wind," the famous 1955 play about the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial, as penned by the late Jerome Lawrence and the late Robert E. Lee, to be directed at the Goodman by Henry Godinez. Casting has not yet been announced but, in a telephone interview, Booth described the likely actors as "exciting." The show will run from Sept. 14 to Oct. 13.

Also in the fall, the Goodman will stage "Primary Trust" by Eboni Booth in the smaller Owen Theatre, under the direction of Malkia Stampley. The play is about a Black man who finds himself adrift after the provincial bookstore where he has worked for 20 years closes. It premiered off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theater Company in New York and will run at the Goodman from Oct. 5 to Nov. 3.

Following the annual produc-



Helen Hunt at the Crosby Street Hotel in New York on Oct. 2, 2012. ENIDALVAREZ/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

tion of "A Christmas Carol," which Booth's arrival has not changed, the Goodman will stage the hit Broadway play "Fat Ham" by James Ijames, in collaboration with the Definition Theatre Company and directed by the rising director Tyrone Phillips. A riff on Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and a critical hit on Broadway, "Fat Ham" will play in the Owen from Jan. 11 to Feb. 23, 2025.

The famously tense, sexy and prismatic "Betrayal" directed by Booth and starring Hunt, follows in the Albert Theatre from Feb. 8 to March 16, 2025. The rest of the cast has not yet been announced.

"BUST, An Afrocurrentist Play," a new play by Zora Howard, follows in the spring. This co-production with the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta (Booth's former theater) is an edgy comedy and

will be directed by the prominent Lileana Blain-Cruz. Following a world premiere at the Alliance, the play will run in the Goodman's Albert Theatre from April 19 to May 18, 2025.

Also in the spring in the Owen Theatre, the longtime Chicago director David Cromer will come to the Goodman to direct a new contemporary play by Jordan Harrison, the author of "Marjorie

Prime" and other works. Precise dates have yet to be announced and the work is as yet untitled.

The Goodman's summer slot in the Albert Theatre will be taken by Lili-Anne Brown's new production of "The Color Purple," from June 21 to July 27, 2025.

The Broadway musical has been produced in the Chicago area several times before, including a long run at the Cadillac Palace of the original Broadway production and a Drury Lane Theatre staging, also directed by Brown. Booth said the Chicago-based director was enthusiastic about returning to this musical, which was released last year as a new movie.

Various other events will take place during the season, including a yet-to-be announced special show for pre-schoolers (no dates yet), a summer 2025 "celebration of local Indigenous artistry," in partnership with the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian in Evanston, and a fall 2024 takeover of the Goodman's Magic Parlour space by Latine magicians as part of Destinos Festival.

The Goodman also said that Booth has retained the prior artistic collective at the theater. At the start of the 2024-25 season, John Collins assumes the role of executive director as Roche Schuller retires.

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