

THEATRE

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Upstairs at the Brass Rail

The Zoo Story and Death Knocks

The second story room, rectangular and low-ceilinged, is filled with theater patrons who sit at tables for four, surrounding a rectangular stage. Amid the hum of conversation, the orders for drinks, and the munching of popcorn, the eye is drawn to the low stage's minimal decor: a park bench set in a carpet of autumn leaves.

Directly at 9 pm, the background music ceases, the lights go out, and *The Zoo Story* begins. In short order, we are in New York's Central Park watching an encounter between two strangers: mild-mannered Peter sitting with a book is accosted by an intense, distracted Jerry.

With an economy of means, Edward Albee's play builds on this chance encounter to show what can happen when strangers open up to each other. It is by turns humorous and disturbing as Jerry and Peter reveal their personalities, and particularly as the story of Jerry's loneliness unfolds in a series of impassioned monologues. The characters grow dependent on each other for self-definition, and there is no exit possible as their anger and dismay lead to an inevitable climax.

The Zoo Story is a departure from recent lighter offerings at the Brass Rail, and that it works is largely because of the excellent performances by Jerry Campbell (as Jerry) and Bill Reid (as Peter), veteran Eugene actors who have performed with various theater groups. Given

the minimal set and the proximity of the audience, the challenge facing Campbell and Reid is great. And yet they manage to suspend our disbelief, which is what effective drama (or poetry or fiction) always does. We soon find ourselves in sympathy with Jerry's attempt at human connection and Peter's jolted sensibility.

Campbell and Reid have the opportunity to doubly impress the audience at the Brass Rail in the second offering of the evening, *Death Knocks*. Woody Allen's one-act comedy provides welcome relief after *The Zoo Story* and showcases the actors' versatility. Bill Reid makes an unusual entrance as Death, come to visit one Nat Ackerman, who being human, resists the idea with vehemence and cunning.

The result is a non-stop series of Woody Allen's one-liners, delivered broadly by Campbell and Reid in Ackerman's living room. Reid's Death, in whiteface, black hooded gown, and high-top sneakers is the usual inept Allen character, struggling with an uncooperative world. And Campbell's Ackerman, with dressing gown and cigar, is a successful garment baron accustomed to driving a hard bargain. *Death Knocks* is an obvious poke at Bergman's film, *The Seventh Seal*, and given the ineptness of Woody Allen's Death, you can guess the outcome of this brief but entertaining piece.

The evening's performances are presented by Mammoth Productions, an outgrowth of AORTA (the Autonomous Oregon Repertory Theater Actors), which includes Jerry Campbell and Bill Reid among its founding members, as well as Director Ken Hof and Stage Manager Rebecca Proctor. Mammoth Productions is but one of several alternative theater companies who have found an outlet at the Brass Rail in the last year. The performers in these companies (including Cascade Balzac, On the Edge, and the Neighborhood Players) are becoming a loose repertory company of their own, with people plugging into various roles and companies as needed.

Attendance at the Brass Rail productions indicates that these recent developments in alternative theater are welcomed by the community. And the theater companies benefit by the Brass Rail's liberal policy of granting complete artistic control to the companies themselves. The result is theater that is vibrant, experimental, and generally first-rate. Upstairs at the Brass Rail would seem to be well on its way to becoming a Eugene institution.

The Zoo Story and *Death Knocks* will continue at the Brass Rail on Nov. 17 through 19, and will have a final run on Nov. 23, 25 and 26. Reservations are required and can be made by calling 342-2298.

—Tim Volem

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