

Regional Theatre Revival Includes Eugene

Reviews by Deborah McGee

Last weekend saw the passing of a milestone in Eugene theatre: three different independent productions staged simultaneous opening performances.

In December *The Village Voice* made waves by implying that the Broadway/Off Broadway/Off Off, etc. circuit was suffocating. "Now, just when Broadway is wilting, the rest of the garden is beginning to bloom," Don Shewey added, as he described how American theatre arts are flourishing in a regional theatre movement.

Drama does seem to be thriving in our Emerald City. The local ground proves fertile for the generation necessary to fine drama; the sheer number of dramatic offerings is astounding.

Two established repertory companies already exist. Oregon Repertory Theatre, connected to Hult Center operations, persists despite financial troubles. The Very Little Theatre shows mainly musicals and light comedies, and has operated out of its building in South Eugene for many years.

Local higher education drama departments add to the community's agenda of production. Lane Community College still blushes from the successful birthing of its recent *Baby*; University of Oregon theatre calls the ornately centenary Villard Hall its home, and keeps two stages well-dusted through polished performances hailing from either side of theatre's symbolic mask.

Local high schools have frequent and full production schedules. And Magnet Arts (K-8) alternative public school recently tackled no less than the staging of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Eugene's colorful milieu encourages the art of theatre. Young people in bizarre punkish costumes, the living remnants of the gypsy-look counterculture and

those decked out in elegant attire appear so often before our eyes, we tend to forget that people in other cities dress more conservatively. Costume and daily theatrics are part of the air we breathe.

Highly sophisticated performance artists take up residence in our city: Witness new arrival Andre Carpenter, himself a one-man show, who recently moved the Hu-Men Dance Ensemble here from the Bay Area. The country's clowns, vaudeville artists, vagabonds and troubadours pass through Eugene like butterflies every summer and sometimes settle here . . . at least for a while. Live comedy goes on regularly and drama's sister arts of music and dance abound in varied from here in the Willamette Valley.

Last weekend's opening marked the beginning of several weekends' performances. Terra Nova Theatre (TNT) has dug up some fresh theatrical earth in a production staged with style in an art gallery, that of three one-act plays by one of Eugene's many playwrights-in-residence: Dorothy Velasco. Mainstage Theatre and Jim Roberts are reviving the recent Broadway success *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, a loving review of the best of country-flavored music, appearing at one of the city's restaurants. Local music group Sandunga and comedy troupe On The Edge are offering (in a community cultural center) a play whose setting is that great summertime melding of rainbow gatherers and free enterprisers: the Oregon Country Fair. There's so much theatre going on, it's spilling over everywhere.

All weekend *What's Happening* staffers sweated and groaned over their typewriters (while thoroughly enjoying themselves in-audience) to cover for our readers the latest in the local theatre scene.

Three by Velasco

Dorothy Velasco has crafted three quirky, delightful one-act plays, gems of the genre.

Her dialogue rings true. Her characters mesmerize and never lose sight of their sense of humor, while touching upon a certain acupressure point in our human sensitivity: the desire to be somebody special.

Velasco's characters all seek to distinguish themselves from the other barnacles clinging to earth. Jolene (Linda Curry) in *Miracle at Graceland* stands out in her red dress. "If there ain't gonna be kids," she frets to her easygoing husband and charmingly zany mother, "there's got to be something else." In the garden of Graceland, Elvis Presley's memorial estate, Jolene dreams that "The King" visits her for the very craziest of immaculate conceptions.

The Radio Ray Fan Club peers into the relationship between two sisters: Eleanor (Barbara Morseth) has chosen the life of suburban housewife; Flora (Jacquie McClure) "disgraces" the family with such acts as spearheading a campaign to erect a monument to her personal idol, who died under questionable circumstances. As the women compare lives and discuss values, the one-liners never quit rolling, and we connect with Flora, who idolized Radio Ray because he looked "into people's eyes like they were something special."

In *The Metamorphosis of Woody Allen*, the famed comic awakens one morning to find he now inhabits the body of mousy working mother Winnie Konigsberg (Becky Croson-LaChapelle). Such is his shock at this "reduction to absurdity," she/he bargains fiercely and humorously with God to regain his manhood.

These plays demand considerable acting skills to pull them off, since the audience is so close-at-hand in the art gallery. Terra Nova Theatre hired some fine local talent to help christen their newly forged theatre company. "Actors will be paid," they insist. Seeing Jacquie McClure in action (the mother in the first play, Flora in the second) is an awesome experience.

Others in the cast have much-deserved limelight. Chris Pinto is especially good as loveable, gritless Earl Jenkins. Linda Curry steals scenes in her understated role as Tina Plower, Woody Allen's movie star girlfriend. She's all dolled up and goin' somewhere, reading *The National Enquirer* from the inside of a claw-foot bathtub, fully clothed and perching her stylish red pumps just so on the tub's edge.

Velasco's insightful and entertaining vignettes continue at 8 pm March 14, 15, 21 and 22, with a 2 pm matinee on March 16. Staging is ingeniously nestled into a transformed New Zone Gallery.

Pump Boys & Dinettes

Audience participation seems a common feature of the contemporary theatre revival. During the intermission of *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, one lucky ticket holder wins a pop art air freshener. I was depressed for three days because I didn't win.

Despite this setback, the show at Seymour's "The Greenery" Restaurant was a great way to spend an evening—downtown Eugene feeling a little like The Big Apple, with brightly lit buses whooshing by at times outside, store windows lit enticingly, many passers-by peering in upon the stage. The choice of play is perfect for the

setting—indeed, the two women and four men characters seem like ordinary waitresses and busboys as one first sits down. But they are far from ordinary.

The Cupp sisters, owners of a 1950s-style diner, find their best customers a foursome of auto mechanics from a nearby shop, whose philosophy is, "Work won't kill you, worry will," and who spend most of their "working" hours hanging around the cafe. In the second act, they all six skip work and take a Florida vacation, believably transforming the stage into a car with just some minor costume changes and their considerable dramatic skills. Their tight harmonies always compel, and they pull many a gesture from their seemingly bottomless grab-bag of mime and improvisation.

BEST OF SHOW's: Priscilla Beth Walker's (Prudie Cupp) great depth of voice, a softened Patsy Cline, blends on several numbers into a pure sweetness with the clear soprano tones of Connie Doolan (Rhetti Cupp), especially during the duo's "Sister." Rich Clark's piano work is superb: His fingers slip easily from one 50s mode to another, whether Floyd Krameresque, rollicking piano roll blues, or hot Fats Domino rhythms most evident in the show's title song, which opens the second act.

Music theatre it is, and a fine example of the hybridization. It's live cabaret, not in the 50s in Chicago, nor the Berlin 20s, but right here, right now, in good ole downtown Eugene.

Pump Boys and Dinettes continues at 9 pm, March 14, 15, 21, 22, 28 and 29; also at 7 pm on Sundays, March 16, 23 and 30. Seating at Seymour's is arranged so that all have a good view of the stage. Full beverage service is available. Go early if you plan on eating, too.

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