

Laundry and Bourbon

Review by Deborah McGee

Esprit de Corps Actors Ensemble's *Laundry and Bourbon* has nestled snugly into the small theater of Maude Kerns Art Center. Audience members are close, very close, to the players.

Saturday night, the cast basked in the warmth of an especially appreciative audience. The players were charmingly shy when coming back for a second curtain call. My companion asked, "Do you think Eugene theatergoers are too enthusiastic?" My answer: No. People here truly appreciate and honestly support the arts. Having such a fine-caliber play so well produced as *Laundry and Bourbon*, at the very end of summer stock, bespeaks a thriving theater community.

Take a stage a mere 20x10x20. And three actors. And a less than 75-seat house. In spite of such limited dimensions, Esprit de Corps has brought to life a work of art. What fascinated me most was the successful utilization of its petite stature, which pointed out by example the wide spectrum of possible sizes for drama, from grand plays in concert halls to one as intimate as *Laundry and Bourbon*.

The play's characters are very much people most of us know. Eliza Roaring Springs plays Elizabeth, in whose house the action of the play takes place. Elizabeth married her wild man high school sweetheart, who still drives the same pink 1959 T-bird he did back then. Her husband Roy has been a different person since returning from military service in Viet Nam.

Roaring Springs portrays this "feelin' hot and hollow" woman attentively, thoughtfully. She shows great dramatic skill when sharing memories of sweet summer nights in the back seat of the T-bird, the gentleness then of her man's lovemaking. We understand the tightness communicated in those lines around her mouth, the haggardness of her appearance, the stoop-shoulderedness of her posture; we realize her need to forever run her fingers through her hair and why she didn't answer Hattie's ring at her door.

D. Roberts is a verrry funny Hattie, a realistic-looking mother of three, working at staying calm, but who has spent the morning shopping with los muchachos, one of whom almost got caught shoplifting. Hattie's wicked recital of a poem she wrote about her high school sweetheart, Wayne, is one of the play's many highly comic

moments. Wayne and Roy were best buddies, but Hattie chose not to follow her wild one, and married into safer territory. We often laugh at Hattie, but also understand her attraction to television's *Let's Make a Deal* and her hilarious panic that she won't be able to master Mah Jong, the new parlor game rage.

Most of the play is about the interaction between these two women, and the revelations they make to each other while sipping bourbon and folding clothes. Their conversation is a comfy Southern blend of a whole range of human emotions. Part-way through their visit, Amy Lee arrives, a once high school chum, who has chosen the country club/Southern Baptist route. Robin Bennett is hysterical as Amy Lee, pukingly perfect, and plays a dizzy, mostly comic character whose presence balances out the play's heavier moments. All three women manage to show very clearly what life is like for them, the pits being incessantly repetitious chores like laundry duty. We don't wonder why they retreat into fantasies, feed on gossip and flashbacks to romantic teenage days along with their Ritz crackers and cheese, nor why they put energy into pancake suppers.

Director Janet Steiger Carr has run the Neighborhood Players Theater Company for four years, and was recently in Oregon Repertory Theater's *Lion in Winter*. Roaring Springs is a veteran of Very Little Theater's recent *Fiorello* and Mainstage Theater Company's *Wizard of Oz*. D. Roberts has directed and acted in Mixed Pieces Theater productions, and has appeared on the stages of both the University of Oregon and Lane Community College. Bennett, choral director at Willamette High School, has acted in many local productions, most recently the Eugene Festival of Musical Theater's *Peter Pan*. Both Roaring Springs and Bennett make local television commercial appearances.

On a purely narrative level, *Laundry and Bourbon* works well as a somewhat-more-serious-than-television situation comedy, with two friends from high school getting snookered as they bemoan drudgery and the loss of romance. On a more symbolic level, though, their drudgery becomes that chore any of us do repetitively, our particular brand of Sisyphean labor, and the bourbon becomes what-

ever it is we do to keep ourselves on that seemingly unfair treadmill.

Playwright James McClure's script is excellent, shows a fine ear for dialogue, and is a masterpiece of dramatic tension, forever counterpoising laughter and tears. *Lone Star*, McClure's companion piece to *Laundry and Bourbon*, was staged last fall at Maude Kerns, and focused on post-Nam existence from a more male point of view. Producing the two plays together in one evening would be an exciting theatrical experience.

Negative criticisms: Needs more grounding in time and place, that is, more nitty gritty clues to its mid-70s Texas locale. Texan accents were not always true-to-the-ear; perhaps director Carr intended that, to expand the play's universality, but I would prefer more local color. Beginning and ending the play with the music of Patsy Cline was a good start. Also, plays need to start on time, even if this isn't the East Coast—it's a theatrical tradition worth keeping. Lastly, gasp, more ventilation, please!

Petty grievances aside, seeing *Laundry and Bourbon* was delightful, especially when paired with a pleasant pre-show walk in the neighborhood surrounding the lovely old frame building. The group's stated purpose to fulfill "the need in the community to allow some virtually untapped talents to flourish" has seen them off to a fine start. Because Esprit de Corps (spirit of cooperation) Actors Ensemble is a grassroots effort, it means all involved are investing lots of blood and guts. It shows, and it's working. I, too, hope that they are able to stage some Tennessee Williams one-act plays this fall.

Laundry and Bourbon continues Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Aug. 28, 29 and 30. Maude Kerns Art Center is at 1910 E. 15th. Curtain time is 8 pm. Tickets are purposely affordable: \$3.50 at door or at Backstage Dancewear, Downtown Mall.

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