

THEATRE

FROM THE OREGON SHAKESPEAREAN FESTIVAL

Taking Steps

Review by Dorothy Velasco

Taking Steps, Alan Ayckbourn's farce now playing at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival, could be compared to a lemon meringue pie: frothy on the surface but a bit tart underneath. In no other way, however, should this rib-tickling romp be compared to a lemon. It is delicious to the last bite.

Ayckbourn is often called the Neil Simon of England. He is prolific, funny and popular. But he sometimes reveals a bittersweet irony more reminiscent of Woody Allen than Neil Simon. His humor comes from deep within the characters, his jokes are original and intrinsic to the plot, and he doesn't miss a theatrical trick. Every gimmick pays off, with unexpected dividends.

Taking Steps frolics its merry way through three floors of The Pines, an old country house. But as indicated in the script, and designed here by Richard L. Hay, the three stories occupy the same flat stage floor, with the theatrical device of flat stairways, indicated by lines on the floor. It's tremendous fun to see the actors "taking steps" up and down those imaginary stairs—running, trudging, tripping and even falling.

The physical originality of the set, however, is not the main focus of the play. The eccentric characters, caught in a life that is comfortable but not quite satisfying, could hold our interest even without the funny set. There is Elizabeth, an ex-dancer frustrated and bored enough to almost leave her rich husband Roland, who made his fortune in the bucket business. Elizabeth's brother Mark dreams of leaving his job in personnel for something more meaningful, a fishbait shop. Mark's fiancée Kitty keeps running away from him because his droning voice always puts her to sleep. Leslie, the amiable young landlord, who is also a black leather biker, desperately wants to sell

The Pines to Roland, while Watson, the bumbling solicitor sent to prepare the contract, inadvertently confuses every issue. Silly? Yes. But also clever, witty, and totally enjoyable.

Although Ayckbourn's plays are filled with wonderfully devised stage business, director Pat Patton, as usual, has contributed plenty of irresistible goofiness. His cast of six delivers laugh upon laugh.

Linda Alper as the neurotic ex-dancer performs quirky little dance routines to let off steam. Michael Kevin, usually cast in powerful dramatic roles, shows plenty of humor by trying NOT to show anything else when he appears as her brother wearing an abbreviated bathrobe. Robert A. Barnett as the landlord holds his own by managing to look like a skinny, homely laughing lizard.

Philip Davidson is dapper, but slightly unhinged as Roland, and Francia DiMase is sweetly dim-witted as Kitty. But Torrey Hanson steals the show as the tongue-tied Watson. With nerdy glasses, bow tie and jerky movements, he also steals our hearts with his embarrassed eagerness to please. Here is a character who was born to lose, but wait, Ayckbourn turns the tables and little Watson does all right in the end. So does the audience.

Taking Steps is performed in the small Black Swan Theatre, where it is frequently difficult to obtain tickets. The plays in the Black Swan are often exceptionally popular, and one of the problems the Shakespearean Festival will have to face in the near future is how to enlarge the Black Swan or find some other way to allow more people to see the plays there, without losing the intimate quality of the small space.

[Dorothy Velasco's reviews can be heard on The Ashland Report produced by D. Roberts and airing on KLCC-FM's Morning Edition and Sunday Morning programs.]



PHOTO BY HANK KRANZLER

Elisabeth (Linda Alper) is not pleased to be disturbed early in the morning by the noise of two men trying to rouse her drugged husband Roland (Philip Davidson) in Alan Ayckbourn's *Taking Steps* in the Black Swan Theatre in Ashland.

Rap Master Ronnie

Review by Deborah McGee

Rap Master Ronnie is a brilliant satire on the mindless hype oozing daily from the White House these seven long years. Seeing Mainstage Cabaret/Jim Roberts' production is both fun and therapeutic relief for anyone tuned into the current national political scene.

Rap Master Ronnie, with lyrics by Garry Trudeau and music by Elizabeth Swados, weaves 20 thoughtful, thought-provoking and musically pleasing songs into a non-stop, multi-dimensional political cartoon. Think of the best images you've ever seen on newspaper editorial pages. *Rap Master Ronnie* is just as good in its clarity and impact. It goes even one more dimension: It is alive.

While all its seven players deliver many marvelous roles, the stars of the show are Matt Bonham as President and Dei Olson as First Lady. They convey astonishingly hybrid characters: he, both Raygun and Tricky Dick; she both Nancy No-No and Pat Nixon. Bonham is a constant crack-up, insane and childlike, and the laughter only hurts when one stops to realize how right-on is his portrayal. He could have injected a little more Ronnie-ness into the role: greyer hair, maybe, and a more silicon suave delivery. Olson

never lets up on her portrait of a role model any grounded woman would despise. With her vacuous stare from tombstone eyes, and her scrawny, bobbing-like-a-chicken neck, she is utterly disgusting and as subtle a scene-stealer as her real-life counterpart.

The rest of the cast all have golden moments. Priscilla Walker hypnotizes in "Counting." She sings it as if she were a human metronome, repeating two notes in minor key into a perfectly timed crescendo. The song, like the whole play, shows clearly that political consciousness can be mixed with aesthetics—it just isn't always done so well as in this production.

Steven Reddy got to me in "New Year's Eve in Beirut, 1983," and in other numbers as well. He has a broad tenor voice, filled with sweet youthful manhood. In "Beirut" he projects the character of a lonely marine writing of his confusion and disillusionment to a movie actress. His roles in the play echo the reality of so many young men lost in so many ugly wars made by so many old men.

Too bad there's not time to praise other moments by these two, and the talents of the rest of

the cast: Cat Stewart, Erik Hegland and Carl Keller. The whole bunch is terrific. Musical direction by Mark Sandberg never misses a beat—don't miss the way he introduces the punk rock number.

Joe Zingo directs this time 'round for Mainstage, and Eugeneans can enjoy another hit resulting from his raw energy now again in visible, if temporary, form. His sets for *Rap Master Ronnie* are the most ambitious yet to decorate Seymour's Restaurant. Blow-ups of recent political cartoons frame the tiny stage, setting the mood, and keeping us amused while everyone is served food and drinks. Cabaret-style theater doesn't always mean precise curtain times. Instead of giving us sappy pulp after our treats, though, Mainstage uses the vehicle to produce fine musical theater.

Producer Jim Roberts has sifted through the sands of contemporary American theater and found another pearl. Program notes call it "a celebration of a republic that 210 years later is still trying to get it right." Mainstage gets it right again. See *What's Happening's* calendar for ticket information.

EXCELSIOR PASTRIES
GELATO

DINNER SPECIALS

TO GO or TO STAY

April 13-18

COFFEE

SOUP: Cream of Zucchini with Pesto \$2.50/pint

CHICKEN: Chicken Marbella (Olives, Capers, Garlic, Dried Fruit) on Rice \$4.75

ONE DISH MEAL: Quesadillas with Hazelnuts, Roasted Tomatillo Salsa, and Jack Cheese \$3.75

PASTA: Seafood Lasagna \$5.25

PIZZA: Soy Cream Cheese, Teriyaki Chicken and Green Onions (8" pizza) \$6.00

QUICHE: Broccoli and Pancetta \$2.50

CATERING

SPECIALTY FOODS



Call ahead and we'll have your order ready!

• HOURS •

M-Th 7:30 a.m.-10 p.m.
Fri. 7:30 a.m.-11 p.m.
Sat. 10 a.m.-11 p.m.
Sun. noon-6 p.m.

901 Pearl Street
342-3110

GIFT BASKETS

URBAN CAFE
BEER
WINE

University Theatre Presents



Waiting For Godot

by Samuel Beckett

April 10-11, 16-18, 24-25

Robinson Theatre 8:00 pm

Tickets \$3.50, \$4.50, \$5.50

For Reservations Call 686-4191



LANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESENTS

BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS



The New Neil Simon Comedy About Growing Up Poor in Brooklyn

Call 726-2202 for tickets

LCC Theatre

APRIL 24-30, MAY 1-2