

# THEATRE

Review: *Graceland*

## Great theater magic at New Zone Gallery

by Deborah S. McGee

Mallomar Productions' *Graceland* at the New Zone Gallery shows that great theater magic can happen with a minimum of fuss. A one-act, one-hour play by Ellen Byron, *Graceland* tells of two lovelorn women rooted in the American South. Bev's a housewife from Delaware. Rootie's a runaway wife from down bayou Louisiana way. They're avid readers of *National Enquirer*. Their love lives sound like the lyrics to Country Western songs.

Elvis Presley is the catalyst that brings Bev and Rootie together, at *Graceland* mansion just three days before its opening. The Memphis mansion is a memorial palace to "The King," '50's and '60's rocker Elvis, whose name has reached the remotest corners of Earth. Elvis was/is the greatest star so far to a huge hunk of the world's people. And *Graceland* deftly explores why.

Byron's *Graceland* and local playwright Dorothy Velasco's *Miracle At Graceland* (also staged recently at the New Zone) get right down to dealing with issues of immortality. Their characters feel they have connections to other dimensions. Both plays explore the realm of the supernatural, and, through looking at American fascination with personalities such as Elvis, shed a light of understanding on what may be strange phenomena to some: collecting of the Sacred One's belongings (as in Elvis's scarves), using the Beloved's spirit to solve everyday problems, and attaining a level of awe not found anywhere else in their dreadful lives. In both plays, the characters turn their eyes upward.

Except for such themes, the two plays are very different, and already there is a rumor that someday there be may a double feature production.

*Graceland* is exciting minimalist theater: two roles, a stage off the center of a bare large room, and the audience at 10-20 feet away. Intense. At this range, ya gotta be good, and Heather Copeland and D. Roberts are. Bev is initially somewhat repulsive, wiggling her ample buns to "Stuck On You," but you end up loving Roberts' character. She never loses her dignity, and projects great warmth in an Earth Mother style from behind a coral, beige and white polyester pantsuit.

Copeland is Rootie Hallert, an obnoxious, gum-snapping, overly made-up sassy upstart. She seems

without a care . . . until you hear her story. The telling of both women's tales is brilliantly acted—and directed, by Joseph Gilg. The interaction between players shows marvelous sensitivity; the play never gets sappy, and manages to balance finely on the middle ground of the tenderness scale. "We cry every night," Roberts says.

What's most exciting about *Graceland* is that it's a breakthrough in women's roles in the arts. The majority of the time, women are peripherals, or sexy bitches, or one stereotype or another. Real women are rare. In *Graceland*, two women transcend their initial competition, coming to a moment of true affection with each other. We all know it happens in real life and here it is, the subject of fine art. In *Graceland*, too, one generation yields gracefully to another, and to tell which would spoil your experience. Compassion replaces competition in a believable—and hopeful—way.

Just a few suggestions: Curve the chairs so they're not in a straight line, and put a fan at the door, facing stageward. Also, would it be possible to have Bev saying something while she's at work in the beginning? Other than that, this production is a gem. In New York, they'd be lined up as far as our Ferry Street Bridge to see it.

Curtain time is a prompt 8 pm, and at 7:30 there's a radio tribute to Elvis by sound designer Ron Royer, done with the voice of Bill Barrett. It's a great way to get in the mood of the play, and even if you've never been much of an Elvis fan, you'll be amazed at how you remember his lyrics—so strongly is his music ingrained in our culture.

Lots of good parking is nearby and 5th Street Public Market, now open evenings, is just a block away for a last-minute refreshment before curtain. There's a comfy wrought-iron bench out front of the gallery for watching the colorful street theater rolling by.

Mallomar Productions is a new name for roughly the same people as D. Roberts Productions, who did *Laundry & Bourbon* at Maude Kerns last summer. The name is from the candy bar, which has a part in the play. The group also plans a Sunday, August 16, commemoration dinner at Terry's Diner in honor of the tenth anniversary of Elvis's death.



Heather Copeland and D. Roberts are in *Graceland*. See calendar, July 30, for details.

Review: "Master Harold" . . . and *The Boys*

## Brilliant play, great production

by Dorothy Velasco

Athol Fugard is one of this century's most impressive playwrights. As a South African his themes are profoundly serious and topical, but they also reach beyond the confines of specific incidents of racism to treat subjects of universal importance. "Master Harold" . . . and *The Boys*, one of Fugard's finest dramas, is now playing at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival in a splendid production. This brilliant little play reveals a microcosm of social conflict distilled into a confrontation between a white adolescent and a black servant in a tea room in 1950.

When the play was first performed in 1982, Fugard readily admitted that it was blatantly autobiographical. Deeply ashamed of an incident that occurred in his youth, he wrote the play to atone for his guilt—the guilt of hurting a black surrogate father.

In the play, Master Harold, called Hally, is the adolescent son of a tea room owner. His father is a crippled alcoholic, and Hally has spent most of his youth in the company of Sam and Willie, the black waiters at the tea room. Sam is a father figure, wise and dignified, while Willie is childish and naive.

During the course of a rainy afternoon, family pressures drive

Hally out of his happy childhood relationship with Sam and into the ugly adult world of racial reality. He insults Sam so brutally that he himself will never recover his lost innocence. He is doomed to live with himself and with the realization of his own ugliness. That doom seems even more tragic than the sufferings of Greek heroes, because it's a tragedy of our own time.

Director Henry Woronicz has given the Ashland production a focused, dignified interpretation, with exemplary performances by Ray Chapman as Hally, J.P. Phillips as Sam, and Anthony Lee as Willie. Ray Chapman plays Hally as a slightly obnoxious schoolboy, whose hormones are about to break out. His life is complex beyond his experience and he truly cannot prevent himself from clashing with Sam, who sees it coming. Sam understands Hally's problems, Willie's problems, even his own problems, but as a black man in South Africa there is little he can do, beyond maintaining his own

dignity. The situation is heart-breaking, and at the end of the play there is hardly a dry eye in the audience.

Scenic designer Vicki Smith has created a totally realistic tea room on the intimate Black Swan stage, complete with rain visibly dripping outside the window. For an hour and a half we are really in South Africa in 1950.

"Master Harold" . . . and *The Boys* is a short play about a brief incident that represents social injustice on a universal level. Athol Fugard deserves to be respected as one of the major playwrights of our time. I believe he will eventually be ranked alongside Ibsen and Shaw as both an artist and social commentator. The Oregon Shakespearean Festival would do well to produce more of his plays, most notably Fugard's new drama, *The Road To Mecca*.

[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.]

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