

'Ballyhoo' a culture flip

■ ACE presents a bittersweet portrait of Jewish life in the South during the 1930s

By Windy Borman
for the Emerald

The cast performed well in "The Last Night of Ballyhoo," the current performance at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; first night jitters were evident, however.

The Alfred Uhry play, which opened at ACE on Jan. 21, is set in 1939 Atlanta, on the eve of the world premiere of "Gone With the Wind" and with World War II just over the horizon. Most of the play's action occurs in the crowded pastel living room of the Freitags, a fifth generation wealthy Southern Jewish family.

The character Lala Levy summarizes the family's awkward situation by saying "we have no place in society." In order to fit in, particularly in the South, the family has assimilated and lost touch with its heritage.

The Freitags don't speak Hebrew — the head of the family, Adolph, admits he doesn't know more than five Yiddish words — and they celebrate Christmas more elaborately than Chanukah.

No matter how hard they try, they "can't camouflage being Jewish," one family member says.

The journey of cultural awareness and self-discovery in "Last Night" has been called "bittersweet" but would be better illustrated by a chocolate cake with a thick layer of rich chocolate icing. The bitterness comes well into the second act, but the sweetness of the first act lingers.

The play opens with Lala decorating a Christmas tree in the front window, bickering with her mother about whether a star at the top is Jewish. The performance ends with the family gathered around the dinner table giving the traditional Hebrew blessing.

University student Ben Vaughn plays Joe Farkas, a Jewish man from Brooklyn, who is largely responsible for the cultural transformation, which isn't a smooth one. His Yankee demeanor, Eastern European Jewish heritage and pride place him at odds with the popular "us versus them" mentality. His honesty and charm easily win over Adolph and Sunny, Adolph's daughter, however.

The most likeable character in "Last Night" is Adolph, played by John L. Muellner. Adolph leaves behind a life of his own to take over the family business and care for his



Courtesy of Actors Cabaret Eugene

'The Last Night of Ballyhoo' deals with family heritage and pride issues.

widowed sister, widowed sister-in-law and their daughters. While he grumbles a bit, his sarcasm, wit and teasing keep the family together.

Sunny, played by Deborah Davidson, is the family's sensible one. A college student who tends to keep her nose in the books, she quickly puts them aside when she meets Joe. He opens Sunny's eyes to her heritage and by the play's end she admits that her cultural ignorance makes her feel empty.

The two actors have great chemistry on stage and it is easy to believe they're in love.

The sugary-sweetness that contrasts with the cultural bitterness comes from Reba Freitag, played by Marla Norton, and Lala, played by Willow Norton, Marla's real-life daughter. Lala has an infatuation with "Gone With the Wind," possibly because she identifies with Scarlett O'Hara so well.

Lala's mother, Buella, Margot Trieger's role, plays into her daughter's over-dramatizations. Her husband's death, however, helps Buella keep a level head and she asks Lala to "show some spine" and go to Ballyhoo — the social event of the year in Atlanta — with Peachy Weil, played by Brandon Burkeen.

The actors' nervousness on opening night came across in their dialect work and tempo of speech.

For example, the conversation in the first scene was hard to follow because the women spoke rapidly and the Southern dialect sometimes slipped.

When Joe arrived speaking with a Brooklyn dialect, he added another obstacle. By the next scene, the actors relaxed and established a comfortable rhythm, although the Southern dialect remained a challenge for some.

Overall, "The Last Night of Ballyhoo" is a nice taste of the trials of self-discovery that everyone faces

during their lives.

The show continues Friday, with shows each weekend night through Feb. 19. Performances begin at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$14 in advance, but a limited number of student tickets are available for \$10. For reservations and information call the box office at 683-4368.



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