Common's new CD has uncommon message

■ 'Like Water for Chocolate' offers a refreshing take on rap

MUSIC

Like Water for Chocolate
Common, MCA Records.
★★★★☆

By Jessica Blanchard
Oregon Daily Emerald

It's definitely tough making it in the mainstream rap scene, and in his fourth album, Common finds himself torn between his artistic ideals and his need to present the image of a hard-core rapper to sell CDs.

In "Like Water for Chocolate," Common attempts to straddle the line between being a rapper with a heart and principles, and being tough enough to convince people that he's no softy.

To that end, he's recorded some raw raps and laced the CD with guest artists by the likes of D'Angelo, MC Lyte and Mos Def.

On this album, he has mixed results.

In "Dooinit," for example, Common takes a swipe at the rap music industry, which he views as having lost its creativity and selling out, recording albums that all sound the same just to make more money. Other rappers are "scared to take a chance in the game/ you used to breakdance/ it's a shame," he says.

But it's hypocritical of him to criticize the rap industry for not producing fresh music, when he's following in their footsteps: sampling from other artists, using as much profanity as possible and compromising his personal goals as an artist by modeling himself after other hard-core rappers.

Despite his criticism of the industry, Common pats himself on the back for offering his latest album, "a brainstorm that will make [people] dance in the rain." The end of "Dooinit" is marred by some annoying mixing, but overall, the song is catchy.

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Other notable tracks include "The Light," which Common describes as "an open love letter" to an as-yet-unnamed girl. The lyrics are romantic, and the song is memorable despite its chorus, which is vaguely reminiscent of a sitcom theme song.

"There are times when I'm lost, I try to find you/ you know to give me space when it's time to/ my heart's dictionary defines you as love and happiness," are typical lyrics from the track, which also deals with tough topics like abstinence and equality between the sexes.

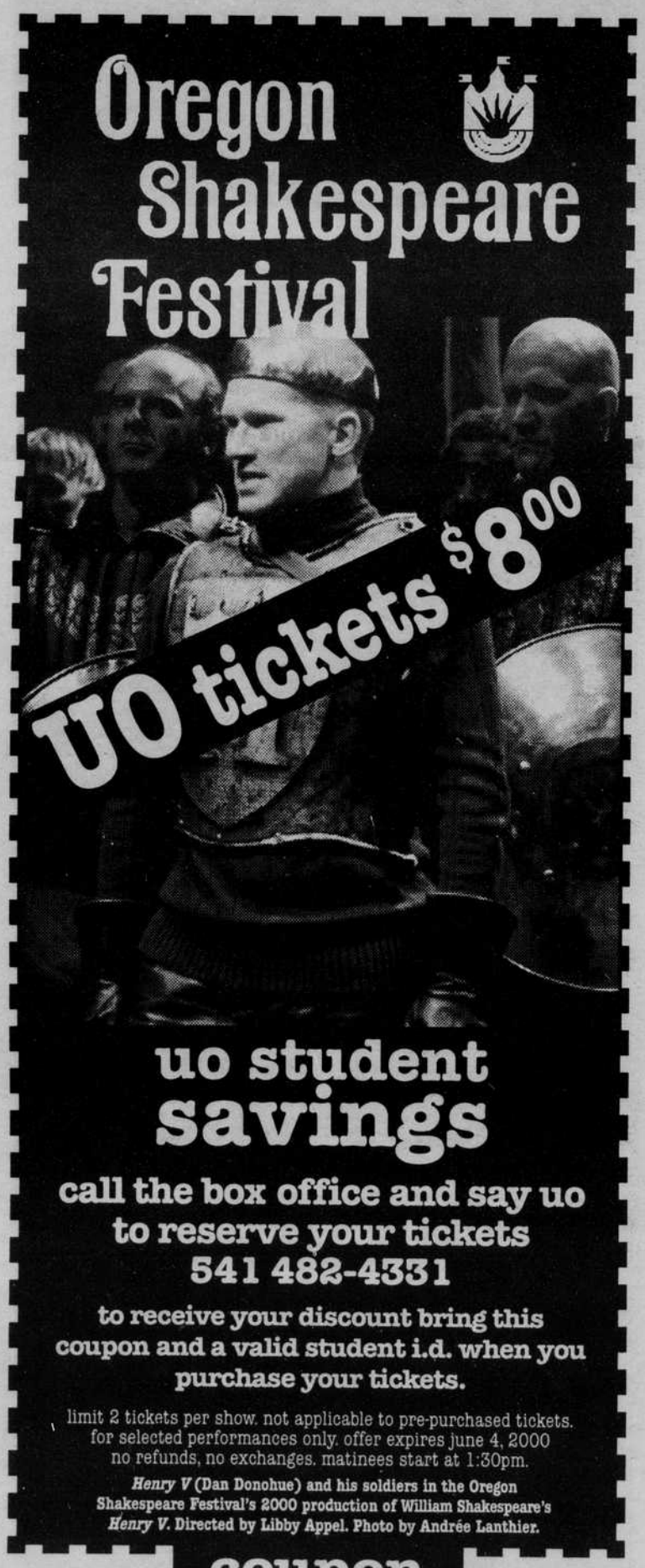
And in "Song to Assata," Common lends his voice to the movement to free Assata Shakur, a former Black Panther and U.S. political refugee living in Cuba.

Common's graphic descriptions of violence, which paint a vivid picture in the listener's mind, are coupled with a soaring harmony in the chorus to make this track one of the strongest on the album.

Certain tracks on the album do have some racist or homophobic lyrics, but noticeably absent are the usual misogynist lines. In "The Light," for example, he raps, "I never call you my bitch/ or even my boo/ there's so much in a name/ and so much more in you."

Hearing a rapper who demonstrates actual respect for women is a nice change, to say the least.

"Like Water for Chocolate" does leave Common some room to grow as an artist, but it is nonetheless a valiant effort. It's refreshing to hear a rapper who actually has a message, beyond telling the world what a thug he is.



'Return to Me' has heart

■ Bonnie Hunt's new film struggles with a balance between affection and wit

By Mark Caro
Chicago Tribune

Bonnie Hunt's "Return to Me" is a movie that does great honor to its premise. A man loses his wife in a car crash and a year later falls for the young woman who, unbeknownst to both of them, had received the wife's heart in a transplant.

But how much reverence does this premise deserve? The heart switcheroo not only sets the table, but it also provides the film with its one and only conflict.

When will she tell him about her transplant? What will each of their reactions be when they discover whose heart she has?

An intuitive observer could theorize how two thoughtful, sympathetic characters such as David Duchovny's Bob and Minnie Driver's Grace might handle such a situation.

My guess would have been that both would be shocked and flabbergasted but would try to see God's poetry somewhere in the design. The wife's heart lives on, still beating for Bob, and for that he and Grace could both be grateful.

From their dancing together at the fund raiser to a bloody Bob dashing alongside Elizabeth as she's wheeled through the hospital on a gurney.

On one hand, Hunt's restraint is admirable; she has spared us the clichèd, manipulative shots of the car driving home, the oncoming headlights, the horrible crash noise and fade-to-black. Yet the cut doesn't hammer home the suddenness of death's arrival as much as it throws the viewer off, probably because Hunt has chosen to keep a performance of the Dean Martin standard "Return to Me" playing on the soundtrack as the action moves from the dance floor to the hospital. The tone can't be shatteringly tragic and wistful at the same time.

Often you sense Hunt and co-writer Don Lake struggling to find the right balance — how to avoid being manipulative without cheating the audience out of honest emotional reactions.

They need to convey Bob's grief, yet the repeated shots of Duchovny huddled on his hallway floor sobbing still feel like a bit much, especially when he's telling the big family dog still eagerly awaiting Elizabeth's arrival, "She's not coming home." True, Hunt and Lake could have gotten even more mileage out of the cute dog and gorilla, yet their relative restraint doesn't change the fact that this remains one of those movies featuring a cute dog and gorilla.

Grace starts out as a sickly young woman in the hospital surrounded by her loving family and friends, who also are essential parts of her life when she's healthy and rosy cheeked. She lives upstairs from O'Reilly's Italian restaurant, which is owned by her doting grandfather played, with a rather thick Irish brogue, by Carroll O'Connor in his first film role in 25 years.

> *The leads have a nice chemistry together — you root for them — though Duchovny is not an actor who becomes larger than life on the big screen.*

O'Reilly's is the friendly neighborhood hangout for the grandfather and three of his fellow widower friends — it's like Archie Bunker's Place without the prejudice.

The friends, including Robert Loggia as the Italian chef, play low-stakes poker and engage in some cutesy, "High Fidelity"-for-older-folks-type arguments, like whether the best singers are Italian or Irish.

As she showed on her two short-lived television series, "The Building" and "The Bonnie Hunt Show," Hunt is a funny, smart writer who respects her audience and creates supporting characters that she loves.

The endearing "Return to Me" ensemble also includes the writer-director in one of her patented quick-witted-best-friend roles as Grace's pal Megan; Jim Belushi, appealing for the first time in ages as Megan's coarse firefighter husband; Hunt's longtime buddy and TV co-star Holly Wortell in a scene-stealing turn as a Bob's blabby, snobby blind date; Lake in a less original bit involving hair plugs; and Dick Cusack as a zoo patron who loves to tout his generous "strictly anonymous" donations.

Hunt even gives Bob's teenage housesitter a moment to shine as he bravely struggles with his in-line skates.

The leads have a nice chemistry together — you root for them — though Duchovny is not an actor who becomes larger than life on the big screen.

His lack of presence, in a sense, helps him appear more vulnerable, but his range remains limited; he's got a wicked deadpan and conveys simmering frustration well, but when the script calls on him to grin giddily, you can feel the strain.

If anything, the movie suffers from a surfeit of affection. Hunt is a favorite talk-show guest, particularly of David Letterman, because she mixes her warm presence with a razor-sharp wit. But here almost all of the swords remain sheathed.

To drum up conflict, Grace and everyone around her behaves as if she were driving the car that killed Elizabeth; then, at least, her guilty feelings would have some practical basis.

The actual predicament is worthy of the "Mama mia" that one character exclaims, but it never feels like a situation that these sensible characters couldn't handle without going through the predictable romantic-comedy motions.

Yet the two funniest lines, delivered by the grandfather and Megan, are also the bluntest — and truest.

We get Italy. We get cute old nuns. But all we really care about are the characters' hearts.

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