

Old play explores themes of today

■ Though 'The Adding Machine' was first produced in 1923, it contains contemporary ideas

By John Liebhart
Oregon Daily Emerald

The CliffsNotes version of the University Theatre's production of "The Adding Machine" is quite simple.

It is a story of Mr. Zero who tries to break out of the hell he has created for himself. On the anniversary of his 25th year of service at a large department store, the accountant Zero learns that he will be laid off because his company decides to buy an adding machine.

"Any high school girl can do it," he is told by his boss.

Hoping to be called in for a raise and a promotion, rather than a pink slip, Mr. Zero goes berserk and kills his boss, initiating a roller coaster ride through his trial, prison sentence, execution and his life in the afterworld.

While the story could be pulled out of today's headlines, the original, written by Elmer Rice, was first produced in 1923. Director Joseph Gilg said he did not choose the play for its sensationalism. Rather, he was more attracted to its universal critique of alienation in a world of mass production.

"We feel a lot of contemporary parallels to this play," Gilg said, noting that Oregon still has one of the highest unemployment rates in the (United States). "A lot of people in Oregon are feeling that situation directly."

But Zero's predicament transcends job woes. He is constantly under threat at home from his wife, who attempts to climb the social ladder, and his co-worker, whom he may have feelings for but would rather just yell at.

"Zero kind of lets things happen to him," said j. nick dickert, who plays Zero. Killing his boss was "probably the first decision he made in his life."

Under pressure at home and at work, Zero attempts to create a space of his own, mostly in his mind. While the play darts between Zero's dialogue and personal thoughts, the audience is invited directly into the character's thought process. It's not a pretty sight. He dreams about asking the boss for a raise and asking his co-worker for a date. He also fantasizes about his former neighbor, a semi-exhibitionist whom he called the cops on after Mrs. Zero spotted him gawking.

The bottom line, Gilg said, is Zero's high expectations within his limited scope.

"He worked 25 years, and he felt that it should get him a little recognition, a raise and a promotion," Gilg said. "All it got him was unemployment."

The look and feel of "The Adding Machine" adds to Zero's predicament. The play begins in a cacophony of noise: Feet stamping, hands clapping, typewriters typing, all to a techno beat as the 15-member cast marches onto the stage.

However, it is the stage that truly sets the look and feel of Zero's predicament. The massive set is a bare-bones structure, angular in all senses of the word, set in a steely marble gray that more resembles scaffolding than a set. Pipes are exposed, as are the platform supports. Two video screens hanging the stage from above. They are constantly tuned to either old movies or live footage of the play (from two camera operators who walk the stage, an "extremely technical" act said Desmond Hollopeter, one of the cameramen.)

Calling the set a maze and a rat-



Adam Amato Emerald

Lead actor j. nick dickert, 'Mr. Zero,' prepares for a rehearsal of 'The Adding Machine,' opening Friday and running through April 27.

trap, director Gilg said, "The actors become insignificant in that stage." He noted that the single set serves as all locations for the eight-act play and all of the actors are on stage throughout the production.

To add a bit more punch to the play, Gilg decided to use the missing fifth scene that was taken out of the original productions and is thus very difficult to find. This scene shows a tour group traveling

through prison to look at "the boss killer" in his natural environment. It also shows the court scenes of Zero's indictment (in record time) for the murder. Most interestingly to Gilg was what he called the only touching scene between Zero and his wife, when she came to see him before his execution.

"Maybe at some level, this relationship had some meaning," he said, noting that soon after the

couple begins another fight.

As the play races to the end, Zero finally finds a peace for himself. If he can just make it work.

"The Adding Machine" will continue April 12, 13, 18 through 20 and 26 through 27 in Robinson Theatre. Curtain time for all regular performances is 8 p.m.

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