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Play tells tale of lesbian love in life of 'spinster' Dickinson

'Wild Nights' presents a whole new perspective on Emily Dickinson's work

Steven Neuman
Freelance Reporter

The work of poet Emily Dickinson does not usually stir up much controversy, often because it's usually considered tame by modern literary standards.

A new University play might change that.

The University Theatre is presenting "Wild Nights With Emily," which tells the tale of Dickinson and, according to the play, her intimate relationship with longtime friend and sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson. The play opens Friday in the Robinson Theatre.

Written by Madeleine Olnek, "Wild Nights" draws upon recently published copies of Dickinson's work. Research into the original copies of her poems and letters has shown just how much of the poet's work was censored and sanitized by close friends and relatives to remove any hints of an improper lesbian relationship.

Director and Theatre Arts Assistant Professor John Schmor discovered Olnek, the playwright, before finding her 1999 play "Wild Nights."

"I have a friend who's an award-winning playwright in San Francisco who had met Olnek at a conference in New York," Schmor said. "I was having a hell of a time finding a comedy with strong roles for young women that wasn't about pursuing men, or about men. So he said, 'You should talk to Madeleine Olnek,' so I e-mailed her and she sent me four scripts, and this was the one I liked the best."

Senior theater arts major Jena Schmieding, who plays Emily Dickinson, said the most difficult part about playing the poet was making her character as truthful and realistic as possible.

"Taking on the responsibility of presenting a literary artist in a way that honors the text that she had written and also honoring this historical perspective of her text," she said. "Artistically and morally to me it was important that I give my all in allowing her work to come alive."

As the play's research and rehearsal assistant for the director who provides background, Kathy Thomas was responsible for investigating details about the time period and the historical characters. She spoke to a small audience at Mother Kali's Bookstore on Saturday.

"I was very moved by the story because we've all read her work, but you start to see her as a real person whose relationship with Susan, from an early age, inspired such beautiful work," Thomas said.

Thomas said the "spinster" image of Dickinson is partially a posthumous construction by a society unable to embrace lesbian-love poetry, but is more directly a product of family politics.

"There were a lot of family issues," she said. "Emily's brother, Austin, was married to Susan, and Austin was having an affair with Mabel Todd. It was a very long-term, very open affair. You can imagine that Susan had some very strong feelings about Mabel, and so it takes almost no time for a feud to erupt."

After Emily Dickinson's death, the poetry fell into the hands of her sister, who initially picked Susan to edit the poetry. However, Susan stalled the process.

"Probably because of grief over Emily's death, and probably because she understood the complexity of Emily's work, Susan didn't work fast enough," Thomas said. "So she let Mabel Todd take the poetry and do the editing. That's where we get the deletion of Susan's name, the erasing of suggestive lines, and the propagation of the spinster myth."

Schmieding said she had to base her character's actions on a personality essentially lost to history because the play takes a non-traditional approach to Dickinson.

"Instead of giving the audience answers, I feel that it's more important to leave the audience with a question," she said. "No matter who we're talking about, or what story we're presenting, I feel like this story is an example of how history can be skewed. The only thing I could do was follow the script and be true to the love the script portrays and give it my all."

Schmor was not originally a fan of Dickinson's work but noted that the play had changed his perspective.

"I had thought she was just a Hallmark poet," he said.

Thomas also had a change of perspective. The poems she had previously interpreted as sweet took on a new sense of life.

"The fire, the intensity, the passion, the love — (her poetry has) all of that," Thomas said. "It's not just a sweet little tale about flowers when you realize that she was writing very often for someone she cared deeply about."

"We didn't know this before, because the relationship between Susan and Emily was a controversial one at the time."

Lighting designer Rachel Steck, who spoke with Thomas at Mother Kali's, said the script and history informed the production's set and lighting design.

"I think our first inspiration was a picture of Emily's desk facing out to the window with a shade on it," she said.

According to Steck, the image became central to the play's visual motif.

"We thought, as we were hashing out ideas, that we are talking about history and a different histories of what has been presented before so we came into this idea of framing," Steck said. "When you look at the set you'll see multiple frames and multiple windows because our idea is to sort of frame history ... (or make) a picture of history."

Schmor said he was cautiously optimistic about the potential of "Wild Nights" to change people's perceptions.

"I just hope that people are just inspired to read Dickinson more carefully now," he said. "If it just inspires a few people to go back to Dickinson and rethink and refeel who she is, then that's enough."

"Wild Nights With Emily" plays Feb. 27 and 28 at 8 p.m., March 4, 5, 6, 12 and 13 at 8 p.m., and March 7 at 2 p.m. Tickets are available at the EMU Ticket Office or at the Robinson Theatre box office. Tickets are \$5 for University students, \$9 for seniors and University faculty and \$12 for the general public.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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PULSE BRIEF

Four Portland bands will rock WOW Hall Friday

The UO Cultural Forum will sponsor The Portland Showcase, a concert featuring four bands from the Portland area, at WOW Hall on Friday.

Three all-male trios — Jonny X and the Groadies, Life At These Speeds and The Motive — and one all-male quartet, Pseudosix, will represent the Portland music scene.

Cultural Forum regional music coordinator Timothy Cooke said Jonny X and the Groadies produce a

lively scripted show with a hard electronic sound.

"They are quite fun in performance," he said. "They play a 17-minute show that is always the same and very fast."

Cooke said Life At These Speeds and Pseudosix fall into the indie rock category, with the former band playing a more general indie rock and the latter group supplying a mellow feel. He described The Motive's music as "mathematical rock," "very loud and intricate" and "progressive rock."

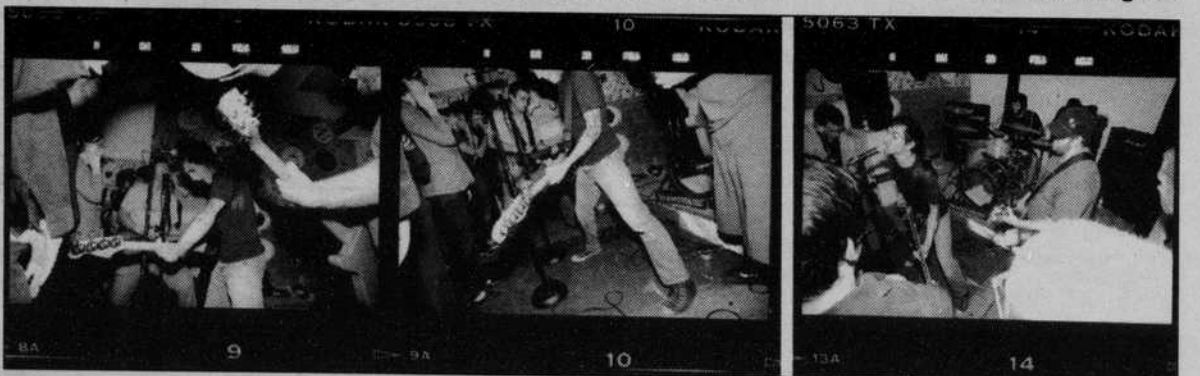
Cooke said the Cultural Forum is sponsoring the show to support the growing number of bands in Portland. He said the event will be an

enjoyable sampling of the city's current underground groups.

"I felt that this would be a great way to promote and bring some talent to the University and Eugene. It's going to be great to see a cross-section of the music scene going on in Portland right now."

WOW Hall is located at 291 W. Eighth Ave. Tickets are available in advance at the EMU Ticket Office and at WOW Hall at \$6 for the general public and \$3 for students. At the door, tickets will be \$8 for the general public and \$4 for students. The doors open at 8 p.m. and the show begins at 8:30 p.m.

— Natasha Chilingirian



The quartet Life At These Speeds will perform at WOW Hall's The Portland Showcase on Friday night with other Portland musicians. Courtesy

Sports Illustrated

on campus

Every Thursday only in the Oregon Daily Emerald.