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'Emily' paints riveting picture of famous poetess' love life

The University production of 'Wild Nights with Emily' is a sexy, interesting portrayal of Dickinson's inside story

By **Steven Neuman**
Freelance Reporter

Let's be honest. I don't usually find 19th-century poets to be all that riveting. All too often, modern plays that attempt to provide an alternative historical perspective on a beloved cultural icon come across as preachy. However, University Theatre's "Wild Nights with Emily" manages the near impossible: It turns what could easily be another stodgy history lesson about Emily Dickinson into something sexy and a whole lot more interesting.

The play tells the tale of Dickinson's romance with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, to whom Dickinson addressed most of her letters/poems.

The hard work and light touch of director John Schmor is readily apparent and completely complements Madeleine Olnek's classy script. "Wild Nights" handles the subject matter with simple grace by focusing on the relationship between Susan and Emily while still contrasting different interpretations of Dickinson's life. The love and relationship becomes the centerpiece upon which all other characters and concepts revolve.

Alexis Papedo, who plays Susan, and Jana Schmieding, who plays Emily, are both superb. Both turn in such memorable performances with their characters that the relationship they create amounts to a third lead role.

The most intimate moments of the play are also the most difficult. However, Schmieding and Papedo's work sparks such an uber-realism that it leaves the theater wonderfully electrified. They also possess a shrewd sense of comedic timing. For example, Papedo's comic delivery of the first line after Emily first kisses



Danielle Hickey Photo Editor

Jana Schmieding plays Emily Dickinson in the play "Wild Nights with Emily." The University Theatre production runs through March 13 at the Robinson Theatre.

Susan ("Perhaps you have kissed every man in town") is perfectly toned to counter-balance the drama, and this balancing act holds fast for the rest of the play as well.

Sarah Turnquist — who plays the deliciously villainous Mabel Todd (mistress of Susan's husband and cast as the creator of the Dickinson "spinster" myth) — takes on her unenviable one-dimensional character with great relish. However, her attempts to bring any texture to the flat character fall short. The same applies to her counterpart Austin Dickinson, played by Chris Hirsch, who seems like a cardboard cutout compared to the fully realized Susan and Emily. In both cases you can't blame Turnquist or Hirsch, who are adequate actors; the fault is clearly Olnek's.

The small cast of actors play a vast assortment of characters and bring a degree of charm to the play. Blythe Daniels, Emily Peterson, Steve Wehmeier and Ian Armstrong bring the starchy New England-style neighbors and relatives of the Dickinsons to life. Collectively, their performances buoy the piece.

The spartan score, written by Jeremy Jennings and performed by Ruth Ames and Amanda Casperson in different combina-

tions of violin, fiddle, harp and piano, possesses the same quality that feels authentically historic. The work of the technical directors and designers is brilliantly tied together to create a cohesive feeling of time and place.

Jenning's score is matched by an inventive set by Mary Jungels, which seems to take sly cues from period furnishings of New England and fuses it with the abstractions of landscape, space, and impressions of Dickinson's actual handwriting. This handwriting also makes an appearance in the sashes and folds of the costumes designed by Harmony Arnold, which are also historically inspired but stylized in a modern manner. Taken together, these aspects of the production create an ethereal and beautiful dream world where history is interesting and Emily Dickinson is in love."

"Wild Nights With Emily" plays 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 general public.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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