

Lady Lovely alive and kicking

by Jay Brown

As a callow youth way back in 1956 I passed up the chance to see the opening of *My Fair Lady* on Broadway. And, as I have gotten older I've learned that things happen or don't happen for a reason. Now I know why I didn't go to that historic opening. Last night I was in the audience when The Musical Company gave its first public performance of the venerable musical.

The Eastside Performance Center is housed in the now defunct Washington-Monroe High School at SE 14th and Stark. The auditorium is, of course, not the best space for serious musical theatre, but with work it may be.

As Henry Higgins, an archetypical MCP, Peter Fornara performed as if the part had been written for him. His acting was sharp and precisely witty with nothing out of character. He never lost his accent and even kept that lisp peculiar to upper-class British snobs.

Cynthia Smith-English's Eliza was excellently performed. Smith-English has a pure and clean soprano voice, precisely in character for the difficult transition from Cockney to upper-class English speech patterns.

As Colonel Pickering, Jeff Miller was the perfect foil to Higgins' braggadocio. Miller's comic flair kept the proceedings flowing splendidly.

The orchestra, under the direction of Dr. Walter Carr, is placed in the balcony to the right of the stage and at times overpowered the singers, especially if they were not facing the audience. The orchestra had an authentic musical theatre sound, a sound peculiar to the genre.

The Musical Company is something new to Portland, but has its roots in the Theatre Workshop, founded in 1947 as part of the Portland Bureau of Parks and Recreation. The aim of the Musical Company is to establish a professional theatre company which produces musicals; and, to quote from Musical Company Director Steve Smith's program notes, "We are committed to using local talent — actors, singers, dancers, musicians and designers — and we will provide a place to help that talent grow."

Theatre Mask comes home

The nationally renowned Theatre Mask Ensemble, based in Portland, presents for the holidays their 1983 home season of original mask theatre at Storefront Theatre (6 S.W. 3rd) during December. Evening Concert Performances will be Thursday through Saturday, December 8-23 at 8 pm. Children's Matinees will be December 17-23 at 1 pm, and December 18-21 at 2:30 pm. For ticket prices and reservations call 224-4001. These



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Theatre Mask Ensemble takes you on a fanciful journey that begins with a perceptive look at our everyday world and ends in a place that exists beyond your wildest imagination.

One of the company's creations is a giant worm who performs incredible acrobatic feats such as a galloping handstand. "With the many masks and movements our theatre is like watching a live three-dimensional animation," says Jerry Mouawad, Director. In another piece entitled "The Swinging Amphibians" the Ensemble plays a chorus of terrestrial frogs whose exuberant leaps and bounds result in a humorous song and dance routine.

Theatre Mask works in a variety of mask styles. In one piece a cowboy's cartoon life is depicted through his moving silver screen of a face. This piece, performed in a mechanical mask, combines film technique and mime in a story set in the Old West.

Mask, movement and music combine to portray real and surreal actions of human nature. "City Park" is a look at some offbeat characters' attempts at social interaction.

The results range from a slapstick battle to a sentimental waltz. Another original work "Schizophrenia" examines a character's psyche which when twisted by the flip of the mask reveals hidden personalities.

The evening concert of Theatre Mask concludes with a playfully abstract piece on evolution, history and the future. Sounds complicated? Not so. The Ensemble designs all its works so that they may be enjoyed by both young and old. Youngsters are captivated by characters and the visuals, while adults may look further into the works to be inspired by their own insights.

In the upcoming year the company will tour the West to Alaska, Arizona, Utah, California, Oregon and Washington. They will play to a variety of audiences including Eskimos, Navajo and Mexicans.

The Portland based company began in 1979 with the intention of creating original mask theatre. Earlier this year their work was rewarded with the highest ranking for a mime company during a nationwide competition sponsored by Dance Films Association as part of National Dance Week.

The three performers in the Ensemble have a variety of professional experience including mime, dance, theatre and circus

techniques. The one thing they have in common is the understanding that the body is a very expressive tool for the stage and most important for mask theatre.

Jerry Mouawad and Carol Uselman are the co-founders and directors of the company. Jerry brings to the company his rudimentary study of mime, while Carol contributes with her varied dance background. They were both looking for a form of mime that was not limited to storytelling illusions, and a type of dance which was not totally defined by form, rhythm and music. They found the new avenue they were looking for in mask theatre. All the ensemble's costumes are designed by Carol. The masks are designed by Jerry. Masks are constructed with the help of Mark A. Opshinsky, the third and newest member. Mark brings to the group a strong sense of improvisational comedy. He was also an instructor at the Hayes-Marshall School of Theatre Arts, a school of movement arts that used masks as a training tool for actors.

The company creates all of its own masks, first by modeling the form in clay and then creating a negative mold with plaster of paris. The final mask is made either of paper or synthetic materials. To bring the mask to life, costume and talent are added.