

A dream play

by Sandra de Helen

Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* is a delicate, sensitive, poetic play whose basic theme is the cannibalization of artists by society (in this case literally). If you saw the movie, with Katherine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift, you saw a grossly sensationalist version of an already sensational topic. You won't see that in the Portland Civic Theatre production as directed by Gary O'Brien. What you will see is an eighty minute dream, full of Williams' verbal arias, with the underlying theme rising and falling until the final climactic moment of truth.

REVIEW

This is as it should be, for the story of *Suddenly Last Summer* is one in which truth is the issue.

Violet Venable (Margaretta Ramsey) is the rich, powerful, gracious mother of Sebastian, whose presence was her primary reason for living and whose absence has aged and disabled her more than her own slight stroke. She tells the story of Sebastian's aesthetic/poetic life ("his work was his life and his life was his work") to Dr. Sugar (Don Alder) for the express purpose of stopping her niece, Catherine Holly (Cassandra Penner), from "babbling" the bizarre story of his death.

Dr. Sugar works at the State Mental Hospital performing frontal lobotomies. He seeks funding and patients. Mrs. Venable will supply him with both, providing he will lobotomize Catherine and that the lobotomy will shut Catherine's mouth.

The story Violet Venable wants so desperately to eradicate from Catherine's mind and lips began when Sebastian chose Catherine as his last summer companion instead of his mother. Each year Sebastian would produce one poem — one poem entitled "Summer of (and whatever the year was)." Each year Sebastian and his mother would travel wherever he wished to go and at the end of the trip the poem would be produced. And each summer Mrs. Venable, knowingly or not, acted as procuress for Sebastian, by attracting all the young, good-looking aesthetic types.

But in 1935, Violet Venable suffered a stroke and was left "slightly disfigured," so that Sebastian asked his cousin Catherine along in his mother's place. He bought Catherine clothes, he dressed her up, and he changed his tastes to fit those Catherine was more likely to attract. At Cabeza de Lobo, he made her wear a white swimsuit that became transparent in the water, then dragged her onto the beach for all to see. Soon, he was followed everywhere by young boys, to whom he gave money.

Each day there were more and more boys, until Sebastian and Catherine had no privacy, even at meals. On the day of his death, Sebastian was popping little white pills for his rheumatic heart. He and Catherine were dining at an outdoor cafe, but the boys were gathered around them begging for bread. When the waiters chased them away, they quickly returned, at the last with ragged tin cans and bits of metal, which they used as instruments to "serenade" the cousins.

Sebastian and Catherine leave the cafe but are chased by the boys. Sebastian takes the wrong route, runs uphill followed by the chanting boys and dies or is killed in the street. When Catherine finds him, she sees

that bits of his body have been torn away and eaten.

His death fits in nicely with Sebastian's view of God, whom he has "seen" in the annual event of the hatching of baby sea turtles who are then mutilated and devoured by carnivorous birds as they desperately scabble toward the sea. Sebastian estimated that only 1/100th of a percent actually made it to the sea.

But while Catherine's story of his death fit Sebastian's view of God, it did not fit his mother's view of what was right and decent in life, much less what was possible to have happened to her son. So, she has tied up Sebastian's will in probate (the will would benefit Catherine, her mother and her brother), confined Catherine to a mental hospital, and is carefully orchestrating the final solution through the hands of Dr. Sugar.

Director O'Brien chose to use the unpublished, alternative ending Williams wrote in 1976, which leaves Dr. Sugar a little less clear on whether or not he wants to do the lobotomy. (Williams' own sister, Rose, was lobotomized in the '30s, then institutionalized for the rest of her life. Williams never forgave his parents for this brutal act.)

Margaretta Ramsey gives a powerful performance, bringing to life all the subtleties of Violet Venable: the absolute terror of facing Sebastian's homosexuality; the controlled rage; the ruthless use and abuse of her power.

Cassandra Penner is technically good, but lacks the sensuality necessary to complete the character of Catherine.

Don Alder keeps the appropriate distance. Dr. Sugar needs to uncover the truth; however, he also seems stiff and uncomfortable.

Bonnie Ross plays Catherine's mother well, being silly without being a caricature. Bryan Mackey is the too boisterous George Holly. Rachel Frey is totally believable as Catherine's "keeper," Sister Felicity. Marjorie Floren plays an understated, mousy Foxhill, Venable's housekeeper.

This play, written in a period when Williams was ambivalent about his own sexuality, presents a dark vision of an oppressive society. It behooves us to look at that picture, as though viewing our own family album. We look at Williams' pictures of a gay poet in 1935, and we see the resemblances that exist in 1985.

We hear one tale of a gay man killed in the street, and we know this is only *one* tale. But when we recognize the similarities in today's society, we can also acknowledge the differences, give ourselves credit for the gains, however few they may seem at times.

So, please see the play. And if you can, go at the end of National Theater Week, Sunday, June 9, at 7 p.m., for this is Actors' Benefit night. Portland Civic Theatre, although 60 years old, hasn't yet grown up enough to view their plays as work — at least not *paid* work for their actors. However, proceeds from ticket sales on June 9 will be divided among the seven actors of this production.

Suddenly Last Summer plays Thursday-Saturday at Portland Civic Theatre, 1530 SW Yamhill, through June 15. Phone 226-3048.

X-wives presents Buried Personalities

X-WIVES, a Portland-based women's theater production company, presents *Buried Personalities: An Evening of Women's Theater*, Friday and Saturday nights, June 14 through June 29 at 8 p.m. at the Echo Theater.

Buried Personalities consists of five one-act plays directed by Kathay Duff and starring Sarazan Torelle James, Carol Steinel, Tillay Christensen and Kelley Edwards.

Kathay Duff and Sarazan Torelle James are the founders of X-WIVES. Duff started acting during the Vietnam War doing guerilla theater, and has most recently worked with the Portland Women's Theater Company directing and acting for the past two years. James starred last summer with Carol Steinel in Harrison Pierce's production of *Dos Lesbos*, and has also worked with the Portland Women's Theater Co. for over two years. Carol Steinel performed in Sumus Theater's production of *Steambath*. Kelley Edwards acted with the Portland Women's Theater Company for over three years and appeared in various productions during that time. Tillay Christensen makes her debut with *Buried Personalities*.

The plays include two written by Kathay Duff, *Stacy* and *Walt Was Wrong*; one written

by Carol Steinel, *2 Smile and 2 Frown*; and *Lemonade*, and *Beauty Standards*.

Stacy stars Steinel, James and Duff and deals with a woman's awakening to violence against women. *Stacy* premiered last December at the Lesbian Forum.

Walt Was Wrong stars James and Edwards in an adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* where the princess balks at destiny and she and the Fairy, Melificent, enter into an argument about destiny.

2 Smile and 2 Frown involves Christensen and James as a lover and an actress as seen through the eyes of the tragedy and comedy masks of theater which hang above the actresses' bed.

Steinel and Christensen play two older women in *Lemonade*, selling lemonade on a highway during Memorial Day weekend. While drinking their spiked profits they discuss the realities and unrealities of their lives.

Sandra DeHelen and Kate Kasten wrote *Beauty Standards* starring James and Edwards as two women comparing their bodies and demonstrating the grotesque and self-hating body images society has taught women to internalize.

Buried Personalities plays six nights only. June 14, 15, 21, 22, 28 and 29 at 8 p.m. at the Echo Theater, 1515 S.E. 37th Ave. The Echo Theater is wheelchair accessible. Tickets are \$5.00 at the door. Reservations are recommended and are available by calling 231-9105.

Women's music cooking this summer

by Sarah Koehl

Women's music enthusiasts are going to have some tough decisions over the new releases this summer.

Sue Fink's premier album, *Big Promise*, combines innovative techno-pop and rock music with outrageous, and often humorous, political lyrics on everything from relationships to nuclear war. Co-produced by Diane Lindsay, *Big Promise* is genuinely different



Sarazan Torelle James, Kelley Edwards, Carol Steinel, Tillay Christensen, and Kathay Duff in *Buried Personalities*.