

## Reviewing the parent of Portland's newest theater company

*What's in a name? On the face of it, the Oregon Shakespearean Festival had a very heterosexual lineup on opening weekend in Ashland: Romeo and Juliet, Boy Meets Girl and The Marriage of Bette and Boo.*

BY STEVE WARREN

More than a decade after the first discussions on the subject, the Oregon Shakespearean Festival will place a resident professional theater company in the 916-seat Intermediate Theatre of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts.

"We don't want to be a clone [of the Festival]," the new company's producer, Dennis Bigelow, said. Based on his experience for the past five years as producing director of the Sacramento Theatre Company, he stresses the importance of sensitivity to "the wants and needs of the community" into which he is moving.

The first season will be announced April 15 when the drive for subscriptions gets under way. There will be five plays running consecutively — as opposed to the repertory system in Ashland — and there will be no Shakespeare on the bill until at least the second or third season.

The first season in Portland will be for Portland alone, although future productions may transfer between Portland and Ashland. The theaters will share a board of directors and the leadership of OSF artistic director Jerry Turner, but the \$1.5 million budget will be independent of OSF's \$6.7 million budget, so that contributors to each theater will know what they are supporting.

What's in a name? On the face of it, the

Oregon Shakespearean Festival had a very heterosexual lineup of plays for their opening weekend in Ashland: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Boy Meets Girl* and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, plus the only neuter title, *A Penny for a Song*. Was it worth the drive?

OSF's *Romeo and Juliet* has, as director Henry Woronicz told a press conference, "cute guys and great costumes (by Michael Olich)" to appeal to teenage girls — and gay men of any age. Besides, Mercutio (Remi Sandri) takes off his shirt before being killed (not a great chest, but the kind I like). The costumes are 20th century, three parts *Godfather* to one part *Clockwork Orange*, with the minor female characters stepping out of the *Sweet Charity* chorus.

Richard Howard (Romeo) is a John Hurt type, and Grace Zandarski (Juliet) is the first "13-year-old" with cellulite. Aside from their overwrought passions at the top of the second act, their performances are passable; as is customary in *Romeo and Juliet*, they are outacted by the supporting cast, especially James Edmondson's Friar Lawrence and Wanda McCaddon's Angela Lansbury-ish Nurse.

Gay Bob Briggs Drive-in Academy Awards to Richard Howard for crying out to Juliet, "Thy beauty hath made me effeminate"; and to John Stadelman as Sampson for grabbing his crotch like Michael Jackson as he says, "tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh."

## Galileo's dilemma lingers on

*"As Man is capable of misinterpreting the stars, so he is capable of misinterpreting the Bible."*

— Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo*

BY EJ WESTLAKE

The scene is in a hall in Rome. Three men: two seem good-natured; one is serious. The serious man is Galileo. He stands in the middle and insists that Earth is not the center of the universe. One of the good-natured men smiles and says, "You are trying to make the universe too simple, all your circles and ellipses. If it please God to have the stars move like this (he moves his hands and arms wildly) wouldn't they move like this (he repeats the gesture)?" Galileo replies, "I believe in reason. If God wanted the stars to move like this (he repeats the gesture) He would make my mind capable of moving like this (again)." This question is then posed: Wouldn't God have the Bible written to reflect what the serious man is teaching if it were indeed true? Galileo replies, "As Man is capable of misinterpreting the stars, so he is capable of misinterpreting the Bible."

Galileo's reply, however, enters into Church doctrine, and the Church believes that it alone has authority to interpret the Bible. Galileo is warned to stop teaching his theory that the sun, not the Earth, is the center of the universe. Galileo has proof that the Earth is not the center, but it conflicts with the Church's interpretation of the Bible. Sound absurd?

How is it that truth could stir such controversy as to cause a scientist to recant? Bertolt Brecht makes a strong statement about the consequences of such dynamics in *The Life of Galileo*, which will be presented April 1-17 by the New Rose Theatre.

Shabaka, who plays the title role, says that it is "a story as old as organized humanity." Truth has always been suppressed by those in power

when it does not coincide with their doctrine. *The Life of Galileo* is not just a story about a man in the 17th century; the same story is happening in capitalist, socialist, imperialist and communist societies.

Galileo recanted under pressure from the state. Brecht asks again and again: What is the responsibility of those who know the truth? Did Galileo abdicate responsibility? Brecht pulls his audience away from the temptation to relate to the material on a purely emotional level; it becomes a thinking, rational audience faced with an irrational dilemma.

In accordance with this dilemma, the New Rose has been working with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry to open dialogue with the community on the issues of the production.

In a context of power and politics, Shabaka's experiences as a black actor in the white-dominated field of theater are of interest. "I have been very lucky," he says. He has worked with the San Francisco Mime Troupe since 1980 and in other non-traditional settings. A number of theater groups were formed in the '60s by black artists for black artists; non-traditional groups exist now outside of traditional criteria; and many companies, including the New Rose, practice non-traditional casting.

So here we are, in a time when we accept that there is no center to the universe, in a time when church officials have difficulty dictating which "truth" to teach and which "truth" to suppress. Now there are other powers that control our science and our truth. Think about that the next time you look at the stars, and think about it as you watch *The Life of Galileo*. •

The main characters of Samuel and Bella Spewack's *Boy Meets Girl* are a team of middle-aged male screenwriters, Benson (Richard Elmore) and Law (Philip Davidson). Benson has a pretty young wife whose only interest is his money, and he makes a reference to the "tarts" his partner associates with, so they can't be gay; but the mechanics of the play are more concerned with splitting up the two men and reuniting them at the end than with pairing up the ingenu (James Finnegan) and ingenue (Michelle Morain) of the title.

It's a funny play that didn't click 100 percent at the opening, but all the elements were there, including a solid cast under Pat Patton's direction and Richard L. Hay's Technicolor deco setting.

An unknown quantity proved one of the hits of the weekend. *A Penny for a Song* was written in 1951 by the late John Whiting, best — if barely — known for *The Devils*, which Ken Russell made into an outrageous movie. *Penny* is fresh, sparkling and utterly delightful, a screwball family comedy on the order of *You Can't Take It with You*, but set in England in 1804.

Two middle-aged brothers live in a country manor. One is married, but both are obsessed.

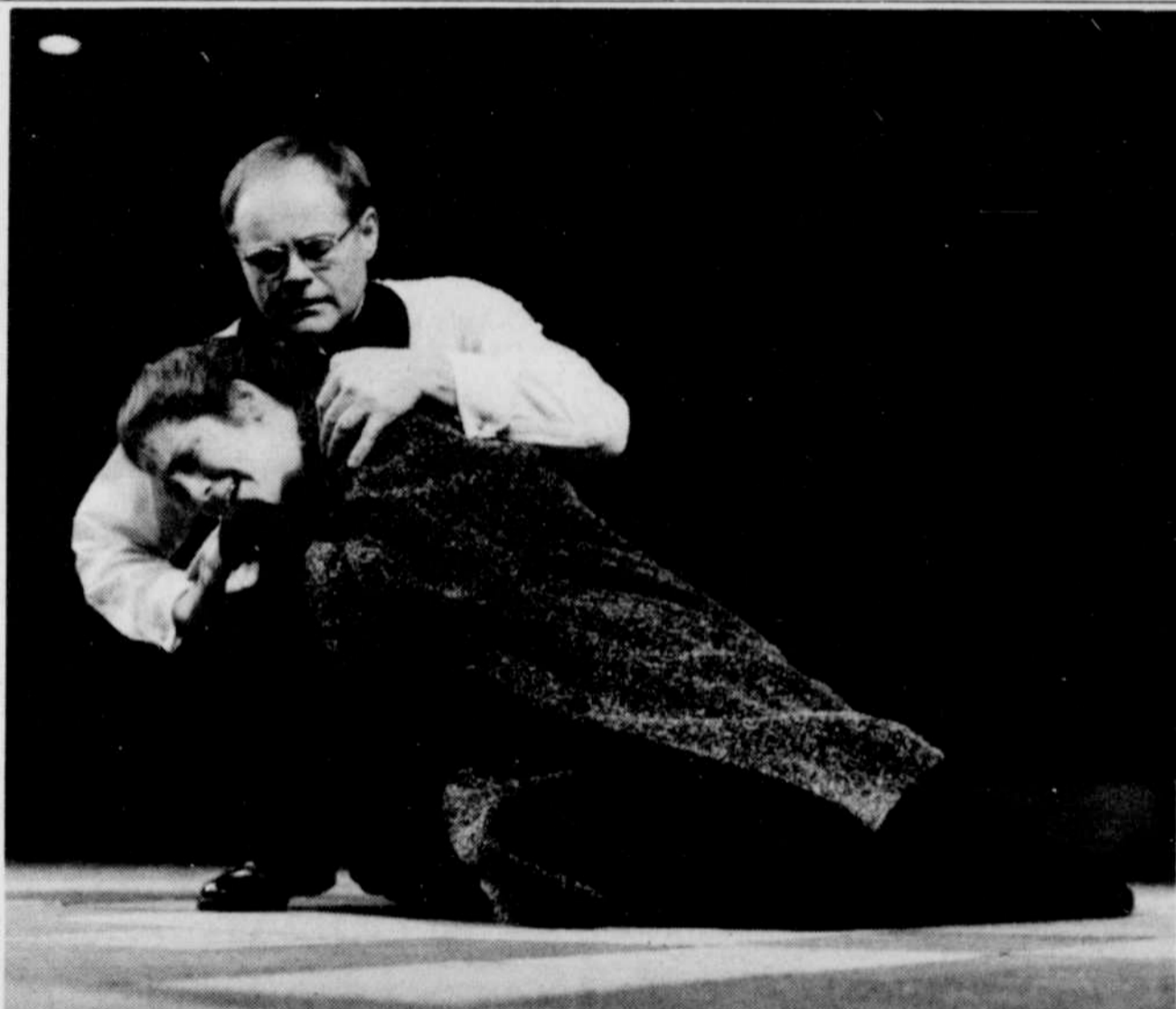
(Larry Paulsen), a sweet, irreverent intellectual who tells the story of his parents' life together. Bette (Robynn Rodriguez) is "a terrible, unending nag" and Boo (Bill Geisslinger) an alcoholic.

Under Michael Kevin's smooth direction the ensemble earns every one of a considerable number of laughs, many of them on such sensitive subjects as dead babies, speech impediments, guilt, servile housewives and their abusive husbands, and . . . A.A. Milne. ("Boo should join A.A.," Bette says in a curious sequitur.) The only performance that could be better is that of John Pribyl as the priest.

Catherine Karhoff kept me in hysterics as Boo's mother, "the dumbest white woman alive."

That these silly people can leave you with a lump in your throat after two hours of laughter is further testimony to Durang's talent.

Except for *Bette and Boo*, which closes June 26, and *A Penny for a Song*, which will be on hiatus from July 10 to Sept. 25, these plays run all season (through the end of October). Also in current repertory is Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, chosen by artistic director Jerry Turner because it "had an urgency to it that was perhaps an echo of AIDS." The play condemns hypocrisy through, among other characters, a young man



James Edmondson as Friar Lawrence and Grace Zandarski as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*

Sir Timothy (William McKereghan) plans to save England from an anticipated Napoleonic invasion by impersonating the emperor and ordering his troops back to France when they arrive. Lamprett (W. Francis Walters) is a reverse pyromaniac. He heads the volunteer fire brigade and gleefully anticipates blazes for them to extinguish.

Lamprett's dictatorial wife Hester (Wanda McCaddon) is, in the course of events, called away to command a platoon in an "Amazon Corps," a sort of women's militia. Their 17-year-old daughter (Katherine Heasley) is awakened in several senses by a Serious Young Man (Lawrence Drozd), an itinerant revolutionary who trades jibes with idly rich (and probably gay) family friend Michael Kevin, whose acerbic tongue enlivens the play with comments both urban ("... the country, where love is conducted on the businesslike basis of procreation") and urbane ("We all believe in [democracy], but most of us are too well-mannered to practice it").

*A Penny for a Song* is a sadly neglected delight.

As in most of Christopher Durang's plays, *The Marriage of Bette* (pronounced, incidentally, in one syllable as in Midler, rather than two as in Davis) and *Boo* suggests that "perhaps everything can be blamed on the Catholic Church." The playwright is represented by Matt

dying from genetically transmitted syphilis. Asked why he chose it over such contemporary AIDS plays as *The Normal Heart* and *As Is*, Turner said flatly, "*Ghosts* is better. . . . I just prefer Ibsen."

For information or reservations, call 482-4331, or write Oregon Shakespearean Festival, P.O. Box 158, Ashland, OR 97520.

Some gay news notes from the quiet, rustic, new-age hippie town of Ashland:

- Cook's Tavern, the only gay (after 10 p.m. when they move the pool tables off the dance floor) bar, has started charging a cover on weekends — only \$1, but it appears to have cut down on business.
- Metropolitan Community Church of the Rogue Valley (773-9416) holds services at First Congregational Church in Ashland.
- The Southern Oregon Lambda Association, which holds monthly meetings and parties, and operates a gay hotline (773-8146), has shifted its base from Grants Pass to Ashland.
- A gay/lesbian rap session/support group meets on Sunday nights.
- A Gay and Lesbian Community Association has been formed at Southern Oregon State University.

So, although I haven't gotten laid there in eight years of annual visits, there is gay life in Ashland and vicinity. •

Photo by Christopher Briscoe