

# just entertainment

## Sex and angst

*A man purporting to speak of women's oppression from women's point of view is risky at best, and in the case of means..., not terribly successful*

BY SANDRA DE HELEN

Michael Scott Reed's third drama *means of restraint*, is in current production at rainforest theatre, 625 NW Everett. This play is supposedly about the human will to live. It's true one of the three characters — Rita (Daryl) — has "HIV disease," another — Camille (Charlene Fernetz) fights off an attacker, and Diane (Debbie Kassner) leaves a dead marriage after ten years, but this play is actually about Camille's decision to trust her two closest friends with her vulnerability.

Camille, not Rita, is the pivotal character of *means...* She is the character to whom the climax happens — a climax that appears without foreshadowing, then resolves to very little indeed, and which seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story.

The story is that Diane returns to Oregon where all three were college roommates. Camille has had a one-night stand with Diane's hubby Rick. Camille has also called Rita over "to make things more interesting." Rita was lovers with Diane back in college before a *menage a trois* encounter with Camille and Rita drove Diane away and eventually into the arms of Rick. Now she's back, Rita has HIV disease, Camille is an artist with an indiscreet bisexual history, and they all live happily everafter.

The first act races from anger and confrontation between Diane and Camille, then Diane and Rita, to heavy sexual vibes that make Camille and Rita seem like ravenous monsters, from upset and angst in record time. Debbie Kassner as Diane is called upon to play every emotion known to

the human race in about 25 minutes. The second act has Diane now living with Rita and Camille, having left Rick and kids behind but expecting to win custody the next day. (Really? With only a part-time job and living in an artist's loft with a bisexual "slut" and a lesbian ex-junkie? Yeah, right.) Camille is suddenly attacked by an unknown man and thereby creates the dramatic climax of the play.

**Denouement.** It's Christmas now. Rita's renowned rage and rhetoric are keeping her alive, Diane got the kids (well, this is fiction after) and they all exchange meaningful gifts.

I believe it is honorable for any writer to try to get inside the lives of characters unlike herself or himself. It is a challenge to write as if you were a member of the opposite gender. I also believe it is a very different thing to attempt to write of the opposite gender's experience, but I wish that men would stop trying to do so for women. A man purporting to speak of women's oppression from women's point of view is risky at best, and in the case of *means*, not terribly successful. As it is, there are too few women speaking for women's experience of women's oppression in a public format. When women's and men's productions are equal in number, perhaps then would be a good time to go public with one's attempts at speaking for the other. Meanwhile, gay men do no better speaking for lesbians than straight men are doing speaking for straight women.

This doesn't mean Michael Scott Reed isn't a good playwright, or that you shouldn't see this production. It has its flaws, the major one is that it's a "women's issues" play

written by a man, another is the climax that appears from nowhere (it would have been more logical for the attack to have come from a formerly mentioned character such as Rick or Elliott — either of which would have made the whole story more interesting) and finally that Rita is disappointingly stereotypical. Reed created two excellent characters with Camille and Diane, however.

The acting is also well done. Rita, the dyed in the wool dyke, filled with her rage and rhetoric, dressed in denim is very nearly real as portrayed by Daryl. Charlene Fernetz is positively riveting to watch. Her Camille is arrogant, smug, and hates her mother, but Fernetz makes us like her better than wussy Diane or even valiant Rita, whose illness alone should glean our sympathy and loyalty.

The set is luscious, lighting forgettable (in other words, perfect) costumes predictable. The theater is Portland's most intimate and is really a delicious little space. Seeing the theater, the set, and — especially — Charlene Fernetz, is worth the ticket price. ▼

particularly welcome because the script itself doesn't come to life fully until Larry enters the stage. J. David Krassner plays this sympathetic gay character so beautifully, we have to believe he's "really" gay. This character is no caricature. He's funny as hell, but he's also caring, sensitive, intelligent and nosy.

The story is one of love and conflict — old as time and just as interesting as always. This one is up-to-date, set in New York City with a woman of the '80s living with her two gay male friends, one of whom (Robbie) has been killed in a boating accident with his lover a few days before the play opens. Anna has returned from his funeral in Houston where she had been cast in the role of Robbie's girlfriend.

Robbie's older brother Pale shows up — the quintessential angry young man — drunk, high, violent and hot. He's so obnoxiously full of life Anna can't help falling love with him. The fact that she already has a wealthy and famous (but sexually cold?) boyfriend is little deterrent.

Things happen and eventually we reach a happy ending. But the story is not *the* story in *Burn This!* It's Jonathan Fuller. It's the script, the lighting, the set, the way four people fill a huge stage so completely you forget you're sitting in an auditorium and begin to feel you're hiding in the shadows of a New York loft eavesdropping on an incredibly interesting situation.

Lanford Wilson must have had fun sidestepping stereotypes when he wrote this play. One particularly fun thing to watch is Pale making tea, chopping vegetables and cooking a perfect omelet center stage while carrying on a conversation. Neither the gay male nor the woman do ANY cooking, cleaning, or picking up after others in this production.

If OSF/Portland repeats its run of *Burn This!* do whatever you need to do to obtain tickets.

— Sandra De Helen

## Burn this! is hot

Jonathan Fuller burns in *Burn This!*, Lanford Wilson's hot new play produced in February by Oregon Shakespeare Festival of Portland. Fuller plays Pale, the flaming heterosexual who gives life to the play and meaning to the life of Anna (Marilyn Jones) who is the play's pivotal character.

OSF's production was very nearly flawless. Dennis Bigelow's direction was brilliant — his subtle touches brought depth and breadth to the characterizations, particularly those of Burton (Marco Barricelli) and Anna. Opening the play with the lighting of a match instantly captured the audience's attention. Allowing the music to become an album on the stereo which runs out and click-click-clicks, vividly reveals Anna's self-absorption. These staging "tricks" are



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