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LEGENDS

Moon written to educate, illuminate

Political theater strives to continue

BY SANDRA DE HELEN

The New Rose Theatre, which, like the rest of the small theaters in Portland, has been suffering financial woes lately, is taking a risk: the current production is a blatantly political offering, shamelessly billing itself as a play "about female oppression." *Ask for the Moon*, by Shirley Gee, author of *Never in My Lifetime*, is a thematic script designed to educate and politically illuminate communities in which it plays.

Theatre

Moon uses a split set to show a 19th century cottage industry (lacemaking) and a contemporary sweatshop, and the continuity of labor conditions from the pre-industrial era to the current time.

New Rose—in its program—refers to itself as an educational and political theater, and to its current season as the "Temptation to Freedom Season." By producing plays which point out social injustices, New Rose may be looking to carve a niche for itself in Portland's apparently dwindling live theater market. *Willamette Week's* recent cover article "Art to Art" stated that Oregon Shakespeare Festival-Portland's entrance here is having a devastating impact on smaller local theater companies. New Rose was in financial difficulty before OSF-P arrived, as was Portland Civic Theater and others. In our own community we see Echo Theater struggling to stay alive, along with the Portland Women's Theatre Company struggling to maintain its space.

Theater audiences are staying away in droves. Except at OSF-P. And why not? OSF-P puts on superior quality productions time after time. They have funds and the city-subsidized space to make it happen. Lou Rowe of the New Rose sticks his neck out and accuses OSF-P of stealing (buying, actually) talent from the smaller companies. *Willamette Week* points out that the Willies and Drammys were shared amongst all the talent of Portland, and that not all the awards went to OSF-P. (Personally, I would point out that none of the awards went to gay theater companies, and I don't think this was an oversight—I think this was discrimination. *WW* and *Oregonian* critics saw gay theater in Portland, applauded ensemble work and some individual performances, but when award time came, somehow gay theater was forgotten. Perhaps the Drammy committee would appreciate hearing from our community members to help jog their memories next award season....)

The Sound of Lesbians

A new entertainment genre is born.

A newcomer to professional comedy, Sally Sheklow found her niche by creating her own entertainment genre: Lesbian Musical Comedy Parody, a theatrical art form in which a lesbian takes a popular, wholesome, mainstream musical comedy and perverts it.

Her works-in-progress include *Oklahoma*, *Came-alot* and *Wet Side Story*. Her first complete work in this genre, *The Sound of Lesbians*, was conceived when Sheklow and a friend (Eugene funny woman Laura Philips) wrote "My Favorite Things" as a way to let off steam on their way home from a lesbian sex workshop.

Over three years in the making, *The Sound of Lesbians* debuted at Oregon's International



Pat Coxman (Kathay Duff, left) and Chris O'Rourke (Faith McDevitt) square off in the Portland Women's Theatre Company premiere production of Aden Ross's comedy, *Ladies' Room*, through Nov. 10.

With the arrival of OSF-P, small theaters in Portland are beginning to face what those in gay or political theater have always faced: a shortage of donors. And they are beginning to hear what alternative theaters have always heard: funds are given based on excellence. They are also feeling what alternative theaters have always felt: discriminated against. When that happens, it is generally time for alliances to be formed. Perhaps Echo, PWTC, Interstate Firehouse, Stark Raving and other gay and/or political theater companies might want to consider banding together, creating some awards of their own to help create visibility (they don't have to be competitive awards—even the Drammys were not competitive awards last year), to help create audience interest, marketability.

Or is that asking for the moon? No. *Ask for the Moon* is the current political production at the New Rose. While the script is sometimes tedious, and director Julie Akers could have done a better job helping the actors vary their voice levels to express emotion, the acting was superior in some cases, and always above average. Set, lighting and costumes were up to New Rose par, which is to say excellent. The New Rose has always attracted people who are committed to providing high quality theater. For several years now, New Rose has also provided color-blind casting. This production is multi-racial, and the ages of the women range from early twenties to retirement age.

Peggy Edna Cooke played Lil to perfection. Lil was Gee's version of a woman who has spent her life sewing, first as an artisan/craftsperson, and finally as a production person who can't keep up and has to resort to stealing from her co-workers' batches, swiping work tickets and pilfering buttons to avoid being fired. Cooke made this woman entirely believable, in spite of the fact that the playwright caused her to use the "f-word" several times, which was completely out of character.

Cynthia Tennant, usually seen as the low

class English maid in farces, or as a member of the improvisational troupe Waggle and Friends, here is one of the lacemakers, who is the scapegoat of the group. She is as adept at drama as comedy, but I long for the day when I can see her in a role without that accent. In fact, the entire play would benefit from a change of venue. Set in England, the cast is required to speak with accents that are sometimes unfamiliar to a U.S. audience. And this country certainly has its share of garment industry sweatshops.

Even more sympathetic and evocative than the script were the opening night pre-show speakers. NRT introduced the audience to Miriam Osthoff, co-president of the Older Women's League, who in turn introduced us to the business representative of the garment union. We were told that of the older people living below poverty level today, two-thirds are women; that retired women receive 76 cents for every dollar earned by retired men; that the garment industry is fighting for its life in this country as it competes with countries that indenture 8 to 12-year-old girls and work them 10 hours, let them sleep two hours, work them six more hours and then let them sleep for six. Other countries have children working for 30 cents a week. The clothes they produce are sold here alongside clothes produced in the United States, for the same amount of money. We were urged to check our labels.

Political theater is not something we will find on prime time television. Live theater costs more, is more risky for the audience (you may not like it, and you can't change channels in the middle of it, and you have to wait for intermission to go to the bathroom), but people spend their time and energy for little or no money for bring it to us, and when they take the risk of providing theater with a political consciousness, they deserve our support.

Ask for the Moon runs Wednesday through Sunday, from now until Oct. 13.

AIDS Trilogy Continues

This month, triangle productions! opens its final play in its trilogy for AIDS: *BENT*, written by Martin Sherman.

Jerry Leith, director of *After the Rain*, the first play of the trilogy, returns to direct the final production. This play deals with a little known historical fact of World War II, and the Nazis' treatment of men in the German concentration camps. This compelling show is sure to keep you on the edge of your seats.

BENT previews at 8 pm on Oct. 18. Tickets for that show will be \$8. The play opens on the following night, with tickets at \$15. *BENT* runs from Oct. 20 through Nov. 10, Thursday through Saturday nights. Tickets shows are \$10. All dates are at the Firehouse Theater.

Tickets for both shows can be obtained by calling either Fred Meyer FASTIXX at 224-8499, or triangle productions! at 235-1170.