

**THEATER**

**Tabloid theater**

Still scandalous after all these years, Jean Cocteau's *Indiscretions* revels in middle-class dysfunction

BY FLORA SUSSELY

*Indiscretions*, which opened April 10 at Artists Repertory Theatre, was scandalous when it premiered in 1938. It was closed down by the Municipal Council of Paris. But, as its playwright Jean Cocteau said, "tact is to understand how to go too far." Apparently, for 1938, a comedy about incest and infidelity that pokes fun at the bourgeois conventions of the day, was too far.

Cocteau was a prodigy. A young, beautiful gay man, he took the poetry salons by storm at the age of 17, published his first book of poetry at 20 and went on to work in almost every artistic discipline: as a filmmaker, playwright, novelist, painter, set designer, choreographer. Cocteau collaborated with the most elite artists of his time, composers Satie and Stravinsky, choreographer Massine, and Picasso.

*Indiscretions* (*Les Parents terribles*) was written during an eight-day opium binge as a vehicle for his lover, Jean Marais. Both Cocteau and Marais had emotionally demanding relationships with their mothers, and that is exactly the root of this kinky comedy.

Director Jon Kretzu has assembled a very talented group of actors and designers for this production. From the moment we sit down, we find ourselves in an opium den atmosphere, with Edith Piaf singing. And by the time the play begins—with JoAnn Johnson sauntering around in black stockings and bustier, puffing aggressively on a cigarette—we are in quite another world.

The ensemble cast gives a wildly funny performance. Nicholas Freeman, whom we recently saw as Bobby in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, plays the most deliciously naive 23-year-old boy. He is so unabashedly alive and loving and innocent, that we all fall in love with him. As it should be. He is, after all, the object of both pure and impure loves. Freeman's portrayal of Michael manages to evoke tenderness and pity and laughter from us. No small feat. Freeman shines.

Johnson, as the spinster sister Leo, was a shocker. Having seen her as the mother in *A Delicate Balance*, knowing the natural sweetness of her voice, it was amazing to see her pull off such a sinister, calculating cauldron of seething and suppressed sexuality and vengeance. She was hilarious. In her "normalcy," her "voice of reason," she projected all the mockery Cocteau intended to launch against the bourgeoisie.

Opposite Johnson, Sharonlee McLean was the pathetic, needy, semi-invalid agoraphobic. McLean's character, Yvonne, is so ridiculous, so transparent and downright stupid sometimes that we can't help loving her. Knowing that Yvonne is a composite of Cocteau's and Marais' mothers, we understand how they could love the person who imprisoned and emotionally blackmailed them. Director Kretzu and costume designer Polley Bowen created with McLean a shabby, childlike presence—a little

girl in a giant bed wearing old, worn red marabou and lace, clutching teddy bears, drunk with sugar water.

Susan McDonald Maginn, new to the Portland theater scene, gave us exactly what the play called for: a beautiful, sweet, strong and intelligent Madeleine. Her physical beauty and her focused, honest performance made the preposterous second act completely believable. And the energy between Maginn and Michael Fisher-Welsh was dynamite.

Fisher-Welsh delivers some of the funniest lines of the evening, makes some of the most comical gestures and allows himself to be the butt of the joke. As George he is such a dork, such a trapped and spineless, bumbling, desperate guy that—even though we don't respect him for a moment—we really like him.

*Indiscretions* is a play that gets funnier and funnier because we find ourselves rooting for people we wouldn't want to hang out with.

These people are weird. And weird is definitely what director Kretzu, set designer Tim Stapleton and lighting designer Scott Stewart have created.

The set changes from an amber-lit, decaying bedroom in which red is the only color to a pristine, sterile loft in pure white and black, then back to the demonic and drugged red. The red room is overpowered by a huge bed where many things happen. The rest of the furniture and props, by contrast, are a child's miniature toys. Brilliant. In fact, the evening is full of obvious and oblique double-entendres.

Bravo to a true ensemble vision. Bowen created beautiful clothing. Every detail was perfect, echoing each character's persona. Sound designer Martin John Gallagher set the mood deliberately and emotionally with old French recordings. And, as always, director Jon Kretzu captured a moment in time with psychological and cultural precision, impeccable timing and large doses of his own unique genius for humor.

It is important to note that Cocteau's homosexuality and the subject matter of *Indiscretions* made him a target of the Nazis when they began occupying France. Outspoken and brave, Cocteau continued to write anti-racist articles even as he sought approval from the Germans to produce plays. He was a paradox, and *Indiscretions*—his first major public success—is not to be missed.

■ *INDISCRETIONS* plays through May 17 at the Reiersgaard Theatre, 1516 SW Alder St. Shows begin at 7 pm on Wednesday and Thursday, at 8 pm on Friday and Saturday, at 2 pm on Sunday and at 7 pm on Sunday, May 17. Tickets are \$16-\$24 and can be purchased through the Artists Repertory Theatre box office at 241-1278.



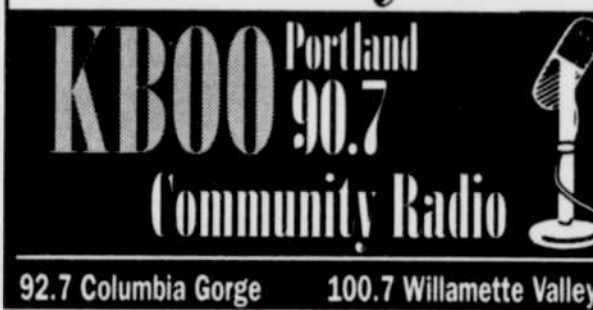
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