

THEATER

A beautiful day for a neighbor

Families go head to head in premiere of dark comedy *The New House*

BY STEPHEN BLAIR

So, you think your family is twisted? Take a look at the vicious, dysfunctional clan in Artists Repertory Theatre's world premiere production *The New House*. The acidic comedy packs enough catfights and sleazy behavior to make Jerry Springer blush.

A teen-age girl with a nasty temper punches her bikini-clad, 21-year-old step-mother in the face. The next-door lesbian verbally thrashes anyone who calls her a dyke. Anthony, a record producer who's building a new house for his trophy wife, cowers as his financial empire crumbles around him.

Portland playwright Joseph Fisher adapted the play from *La Casa Nova*, a 1761 Italian comedy by Carlo Goldini. Fisher moves the action of Goldini's play from Venice, Italy, to Venice Beach, Calif., during the present-day lazy, smoggy days of summer.

Most of the characters are one-dimensional, and the second act drags a bit; still, this is enjoyable dark-comedy-as-indictment of those who favor material wealth over quality human relationships.

Director Jon Kretzu wisely keeps the running time under two hours. (Any more time with these vapid characters, and the audience would scream for mercy.)

Most of the play takes place at Anthony's new home. The set is simple but effective—most of the action takes place on an elevated wooden deck fronting a purple backdrop of palm trees.

Anthony has just realized he's so deep in debt that he may have to scrap plans for the house. As his accountant puts it: "Bean counters count beans. You're beanless."

Meanwhile, his feisty daughter Minnie wants to go to a pricey Ivy League college, and he can't figure out how to tell her she may have to slum it at state school. Minnie



Lesbian couple Rose and Conchita never cease to be amazed at their tacky, vapid neighbors in Artists Repertory Theatre's *The New House*

hates his Barbie doll wife, Cecilia, who lies by the pool all day waiting for a new deck to be built on the roof of the house.

The New House is most entertaining in the first act, when the one-liners fly fast and furious. The best scenes involve lesbian neighbors Rose and Conchita. No timid little background characters, the couple get to have real personalities and make out with each other, no less.

The pair's interactions with their doltish neighbors are hilariously memorable. Anthony, for instance, thinks he knows a surefire way to impress them when they come over for dinner: "I'll show them pictures of Joan Jett at the Grammys."

Rose and Conchita are rather typical lesbians, but in a good way. Rose, an exercise maniac in constant, frantic motion, playfully seduces her partner with the chorus from Melissa Etheridge's "Come to My Window." Conchita is political, taking deep offense when Cecilia arrogantly asks them: "So, are

you guys lesbians or something? Lesbians are so in right now." (Ultimately, having a bigot for a neighbor turns out to be a turn-on when they retire to the bedroom after Conchita goes a few rounds with Cecilia.)

After the sizzle of Act 1, then, Act 2 is a disappointment. The one-liners that fuel the first half are few and far between. Further-

more, the characters are so hollow that, without funny lines, it's hard to give a damn when they get around to resolving their conundrums. But the pacing is quick enough, though, that the play never becomes a bore.

The cast is energetic and silly, making the play seem like a live cartoon at times. Portland actor Tim True, very strong in Artists Rep's 2002 production of *The Laramie Project*, easily portrays the two sides of Anthony: overconfident business tycoon and vulnerable loser.

High school senior Grace Myrtille is hilarious as Minnie in the scenes where she gets furious and cusses

a blue streak. But in quieter scenes, her work lacks subtlety and feels a bit forced.

Kali Stivison plays Anthony's ex-Laker Girl wife. The part is very shallow, but Stivison is highly entertaining as she flaunts Cecilia's considerable pettiness. Sarah Lucht is funny, if a bit over the top, as Rose. As Conchita, Carmela Lanza delivers the play's most balanced performance. She is the only member of the cast to truly capture both the zany and the poignant elements of the script.

Kelly Tallent and Joseph Gallina offer strong support as the chef and construction contractor who work for Anthony.

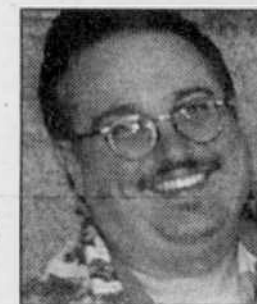
In the end, *The New House* is fun to visit. But you wouldn't want to spend the night. **J**

Artists Repertory Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St., presents *THE NEW HOUSE* through June 27. Tickets are \$15-\$32 from 503-241-1278.

STEPHEN BLAIR is a Portland free-lance writer.

Directing
The New House

John Kretzu, gay co-artistic director at Artists Rep and director of *The New House*, fields some questions about the play, revealing his soft spot for the lesbian couple, Rose and Conchita.



Stephen Blair: How did you become attached to this project?

John Kretzu: I've directed over 100 shows, but I had never done a world premiere. I thought John Kretzu

a world premiere would be so difficult, but Joseph Fisher turned in a great script, and the casting worked really well. And I grew up in L.A., and there aren't too many L.A. plays. I wanted to do something funny.

SB: Who is your favorite character?

JK: It's too hard to choose. It's rare to have a play with eight characters that share the stage. No one gets short-shrifted. It's a true ensemble piece.

SB: If you can't pick a favorite, then who would you most want to take out to dinner?

JK: Rose and Conchita.

SB: I'm assuming the neighbors weren't a lesbian couple in the 1761 version of the play.

JK: In the original there was a pair of ladies who live upstairs. The script refers to them as "sisters." I'm not sure what Goldini had in mind.

SB: Was the scene where Rose and Conchita make out in the script?

JK: The idea for the kiss came late in rehearsals. One day we were playing around, and I asked Sarah and Carmela to flirt during a dinner party scene. The kiss came out of this. The play is very much centered on female characters. They form a marvelous backbone for the play. The lesbians are the only example of a couple that works in the play.

SB: What's your take on the portrayal of queers in popular culture?

JK: There has been an enormous change from when I was growing up. Gay and lesbian characters have become part of the fabric of literature, TV and movies. I don't see this going away. When I was growing up you had to see these characters in English movies. This change is kind of amazing. I am tired of witty gay sidekicks. Do they all have to be witty? Aren't there occasionally gay characters that aren't funny? **J**



justout

NOW OPEN
24 HRSVisit our Web site at
www.justout.com

- WRITE A JUST FRIENDS VOICE PERSONAL AD
- SEND IN CLASSIFIED ADS
- LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
- TRANSITIONS AND NOTABLES
- ORDER A SUBSCRIPTION
- E-MAIL JUST OUT STAFF
- LOCATE OUR DISTRIBUTION POINTS