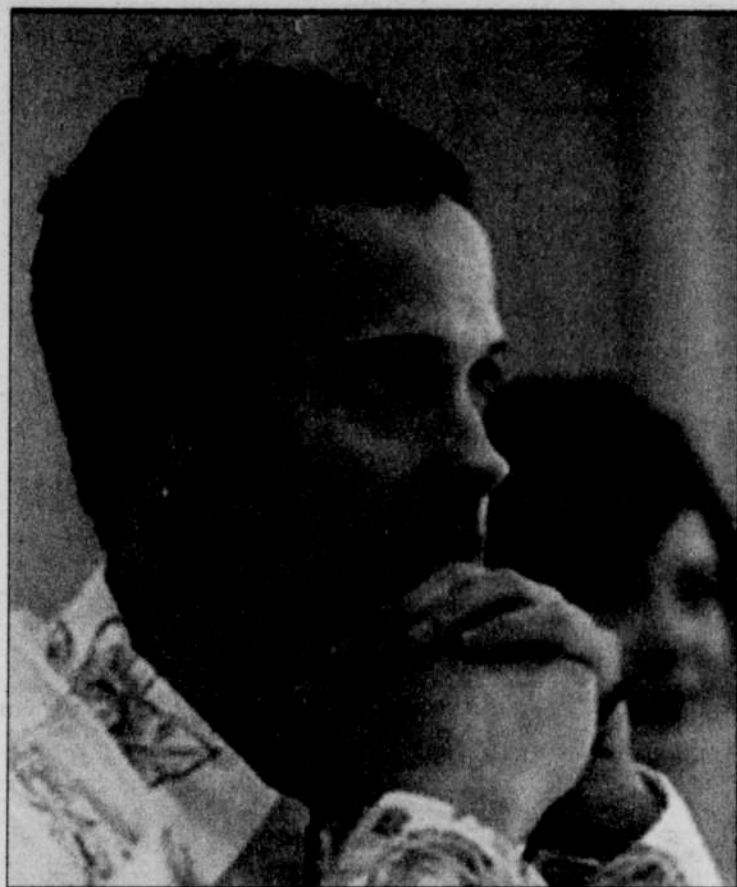




Jeff Whitty is working with Scissor Sisters on a musical version of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*.

themes, like cheerleading and fishing, and it's sitting in the middle of those. It seems to fit."

Whitty's next project is the libretto (the text that ties musicals together) for a musical version

of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*. New York City glam rock band Scissor Sisters is working on the music, and the production should be on Broadway in the next 18 months to two years. "I'm excited; it's a story with drugs, sex and nudity," Whitty laughs, "all set to music!"

Although Whitty has appreciated working in Oregon and being so close to home, he says he loves being in New York, with the ability to access so many shows and collaborate with so many brilliant writers. But his Northwest connections are still strong, and he doesn't rule out retiring to the Portland area later in life.

"Oregonians are truly kind people," says Whitty. "I found that when I lived in Eugene I took Ashland for granted and didn't come down here enough; this is arguably the best regional theater on the West Coast."

But Whitty doesn't want you to take his word for it. "Come to see the festival and

come to see my play; you'll laugh your ass off," he promises.

After giving *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler* a standing ovation on opening night, the satisfied audience wandered out of the theater. The snow had stopped falling, and moonlight saturated the wet streets. Whitty's nerves looked visibly calmed; he could now fly home knowing he left his words and characters in very capable hands. 10

Oregon Shakespeare Festival presents *THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF HEDDA GABLER* through Nov. 1 at Angus Bowmer Theatre, 15 S. Pioneer St. in Ashland. Tickets are \$20-\$81 from [www.osfashland.org](http://www.osfashland.org). Portland Opera's Broadway Across America presents *AVENUE Q* June 24 to 29 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets are \$23-\$60 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

CHELSEA FINE is a southern Oregon freelance writer and photographer.

## Hedda of the Class

Doomed heroine returns from the dead

by Chelsea Fine

Jeff Whitty's *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler* was inspired by Henrik Ibsen's 1890 play *Hedda Gabler* (pronounced Gobbler). The overly dramatic, doomed heroine inspired Whitty because he always wanted to play her.

"It is such a strong concept, the framework of the play enabled so many possibilities," says Whitty of his homage to Hedda. "So much can happen and does, and we can move beyond fun to more compelling content... hopefully it appeals to all audiences."

As the play opens, Hedda (Robin Goodrin Nordli) finds herself on the same settee where she committed suicide in the final moments of Ibsen's play. She is so confused to be alive, but she soon learns she is actually in a limbo referred to as the Cul de Sac for Tragic Women, with Medea (Kate Mulligan) and Mammy (Kimberly Scott) from *Gone with the Wind* as her companions.

Hedda sets about to change her destiny. She and Mammy decide to journey to the dreaded furnace, the place where all characters are written from. On her way she encounters a slew of both classical and modern literary figures, including a campy pair of queens, Patrick (Anthony Heald) and Steven (Jonathan Haugen), possibly based on stereotypical characters from the 1968 production of *The Boys in the Band*. Patrick and Steven become the ladies' unofficial guides during their journey as they swish and sip cocktails and give insightful commentary along the way.

In a strong supporting role, Hedda's husband, Tesman (Christopher DuVal), comes and goes from scene to scene as he tries to convince his wife to follow her destiny—because if she is changed at the furnace and forgotten, then he will fade from existence as well. Tesman lends a lot to the exposition of the first act, and DuVal helps set the comedic tone and pacing.

Part of the attraction of a regional theater is following returning players, like athletes on your favorite team; watching their growth and diversity of roles is truly a pleasure. Two wonderful surprises in this production come from stage veterans Heald and Haugen. Heald, widely known for his menacing roles in *8mm* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, was last

seen as *Tartuffe* in 2007 and now takes on the sweet and sassy roll of Patrick. Haugen, seen in last season's *Romeo and Juliet* as Capulet, brings reverence and joy to the roll of Steven.

Nordli also finds herself in familiar territory, as she played Hedda in the original translation of Ibsen's play five years ago in Ashland. (That production was directed by then guest artist Bill Rauch, who now serves as Oregon Shakespeare Festival's artistic director.) The production conveys the intimacy the actors, crew and writer have with the characters, as a string of humanity and introspection ties together the comedy and the concept. A tool Whitty gives his characters is the ability to break the fourth wall, and while it can be overdone at times, in this instance, it bonds the audience with the characters, lending more laughter and empathy.

But the true gem in the show is Scott's interpretation of Mammy, who accepts her destiny as a slave and can't seem to shake the instinct before meeting a modern-day policewoman who mocks her creation as a fictitious rendering from a white woman's imagination. Scott takes the audience on a wonderful journey from the discovery and acceptance of Mammy to her decision when she and Hedda reach the furnace. Scott is the only actress who has played Mammy since the play opened two years ago in Costa Mesa, Calif.; she truly shows the audience who owns the role.

The Cul de Sac for Tragic Women is where these characters stay for as long as they are remembered; they live out their lives reliving their stories, no matter how dated or stereotypical they are. At one point Hedda begs the audience to just forget her, but Patrick and Steven remind her that as long as audiences can relate to her and writers can reinvent her, she will continue to suffer the same fate.

While some of the characters are over the top, Whitty wants the audience to acknowledge that we have moved on from stereotypes but that we still value these characters. "I don't want to hide these characters; I am proud of them," says Whitty. "We know these stereotypes and cultural references, but it is all about how we carry them into the future."

The references are not just used as punch lines or one-liners. "As an actor I would want to play a great three-dimensional character, and so I write from that," says Whitty. An eternal career might not be appealing to Hedda Gabler, but it doesn't sound too bad to a young Jeff Whitty. 10



Overwhelmed by her new surroundings, Hedda (Robin Goodrin Nordli, right) seeks comfort from her servant (Kimberly Scott).



Patrick (Anthony Heald, left) and Steven (Jonathan Haugen) are fond of their moments of high drama.

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