

## 'Flesh and Blood' innovative, thought provoking romp

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Portland Center Stage's latest offering, "Flesh and Blood," is a pleasing, entertaining romp through a family's century-long journey towards reconciliation. Although the play is full of tough issues, including gay relationships, AIDS, suicide, drug use and infidelity, it was easily accessible and enjoyable.

The family tree and the story stem with Constantine (Peter Gregory), a Greek immigrant whose desire to nurture and build flops when dealing with his family.

He and his bride, Mary (Caren Browning), desire to escape their heritages—poverty—and assimilate into suburbia. But none of the family members quite fits the mold; Mary turns klepto when playing house with pals, eldest daughter Susan (Tara Falk) becomes transparent; Billy (Peter Gaitens) retreats into himself, secluded and angry; Zoe (Holly Spencer) turns to drugs and prostitution to escape Long Island.

The complicated web of new family members provides virtually all of the play's humor; Zoe's drag queen mentor, Cassandra (Jack Clay), has almost a complete monopoly on the laughs. Her "enchanted" son Jamal (Jim Garcia) finishes a distant second. Beyond the entertainment value, though, the grown children's interactions with those they feel com-

fortable with provide the basis of our understanding of their personalities.

I loved the intimacy of the Newmark Theater, but I was glad to be in the balcony; furniture was efficiently transported in via cables, but removing the furniture proved much more difficult. The result, according to a front-row viewer, was that furniture left in the front portion of the raked stage blocked some action behind.

The single most outstanding feature of the play for me was the use of character voices off-stage. In a typical scene, Billy, now known as Will, contacts his mother for the first time in years to request she meet the man he wants to spend his life with. She hears echoes of hurtful things he'd said: "Maybe I don't want to go to Harvard," the voices taunt. "I have a life you know nothing about."

The play comes together when the now-isolated siblings begin to reach out to each other and start to forgive.

As much as I was entertained by "Flesh and Blood," it seemed like something I'd seen many times before. The message of acceptance is a sermon to the faithful; I suspect it more affirms the general political correctness of the audience than it aims to change any negative perception of the characters.

I adored the characters; I was enchanted by the echo technique. However, I was not completely enthralled. The subjects this play ad-



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"Flesh and Blood" family characters pose for a photo. Top left to right: Susan (Tara Falk), Constantine (Peter Gregory). Bottom left to right: Zoe (Holly Spencer), Mary (Caren Browning), Billy (Peter Gaitens).

dresses are as complex as a square meal, but the treatment of the issues is more along the lines of

throwing all the ingredients in a blender and ladling the result out. If political correctness doesn't

bore you, go! Join the rest of the beautiful people and drink your culture in.

## Dreamy plot, surreal format make 'Waking Life' Brilliant



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What do you do when you're stuck in a perpetual dream, unable to discern between reality and subconscious imagination? How can you tell if you are awake or dreaming? Flip a light switch. In writer and director Richard Linklater's latest film, the experimental "Waking Life," changing light levels is one of the only ways the main character can know if he is still asleep.

Originally live-action footage, the film frames were then animated using

a computer program developed by one of Linklater's colleagues. This hybrid method creates a totally surreal, yet stunningly life-like effect, leaving the audience in a quandary similar to that of the main character: Is it real or fake?

The plot takes the main character, an unnamed youth around the age of 17 to 22, to many situations in which someone is talking, not with, but to him, lecturing him if you will. Subjects being talked about range from existentialism and evolution to God and, yes, dreams. Most of the philosophical and intellectual "discussions" apply to

personal interaction and expression



and come from a different person for each subject.

My favorite of these lectures is from a girl who the main character accidentally bumps into while walking down some stairs. The normal, casual "Excuse me" and "Sorry," are exchanged, and the two go their separate ways.

The girl immediately turns around and says, "Can we do that again?" She goes on to express her dislike of the prompt dismissal of human interaction at the prospect of discomfort. She compares the human race to ants, continually walking around with their feelers out, looking for something or someone, but ignoring it once they find it. The two retire to a residence of some sort and "discuss" other issues at length. I suppose my attachment to this segment is attributed directly to my own desire that an attractive young woman would someday do the same to me.

Further emphasis is put on each

"discussion" by the animation style used for each speaker. The styles are sometimes amazingly realistic and detailed, sometimes minimal and very cartoonish. The lines at times squiggle and morph, while at others stay put. These differences illustrate the sharp contrasts among the speakers.

Linklater, director of such movies as "Slacker" and the cult classic "Dazed and Confused," has unveiled a new, totally original medium of modern film which can add unthinkable dimension to otherwise bland screenplays. Had this movie been left unanimated, one would be in constant anticipation of something more: action, rising action, anything to keep one's attention. Not even a true resolution is offered to appease the typical moviegoer. As it is, the format adds volumes of artistic and intellectual implications. I found it difficult to tear my gaze from the screen to jot down illegible notes.

As I was watching "Waking Life," I wasn't too sure how I felt about the movie. Made up entirely of talking (with the exception of a few strange incidents floating around and some subtle humor), it didn't seem to have any sort of meaning. But as soon as I left the theater, I was sure I had seen a very unique film, which was full of heavy issues and critical thinking. Brilliant in format and content, "Waking Life" is an excellent movie, which definitely merits several viewings.