

Theater Dept. takes on 'absurd'

Adam J. Manley
The Clackamas Print

Director David Smith-English wasn't afraid of a challenge when he chose Edward Albee's "A Delicate Balance" for the Theater Department's winter show.

"This is not easy stuff," Smith-English says. "This is challenging stuff and the intelligence, the preparation, the talent that [the actors] bring to it — and the willingness to open and work — has made the process very exciting."

Best known for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," Albee is a playwright known for writing intelligent shows with a staggering amount of complexity. With scripts so complex that they seem unreal, it is no easy feat for a novice director or performer to miss crucial subtext in the dialogue.

"I had the opportunity to work with [Albee] about 10 years ago when he came on campus," said Smith-English. "We were doing one of his plays at that time — 'The Lady from Dubuque' — and he came to one of the rehearsals."

Albee was there to give a speech and the reception afterward was held at Smith-English's house.

"When he came in he said, 'David, let's go someplace, in another room where we can be alone, and talk about our

play,'" said Smith-English.

Revitalized by the experience of actually discussing the performance with the original playwright, Smith-English believes "The Lady From Dubuque" was an astounding success. He carries that unique perspective with him as he brings "A Delicate Balance" to life.

"A Delicate Balance" is about a dysfunctional family and their friends struggling to maintain balance in their lives and relationships. Hard to pin down as either comedy or drama, it finds itself categorized as theater of the absurd — a classification which Albee finds absurd in itself.

When compared to his works, the innate absurdity of many non-absurdist writers, such as Neil Simon, becomes apparent. The same complexity which can make Albee's works a challenge to understand also makes them more like life.

Yet, even after discussing this with Albee, Smith-English still prefers the absurdist genre to describe Albee's works.

"In absurdist theater there's always a force that enters into people's lives that you can't control, you can't even understand, you sometimes can't even identify it," Smith-English explains. "It just drops into your life, and you have to deal with it in some way. And often-times people can't deal with it at all, but it's still there and it won't go away."

"A Delicate Balance" opens in the Osterman Theatre on March 2 and performs every

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 7:00 p.m., and Sunday at 2:30 p.m. until March 12.



ABOVE: (from left) Sarah Wilson, director David Smith-English, Daphne Starling, and Matt Morrison watch a rehearsal of the play.

LEFT: Artist-In-Residence John Renner (bottom) rehearses with students Sarah Griswold (left) and Daphne Starling on a partially completed set.

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'Rent' not worth renting

Michael Kimberling

The Clackamas Print

The screen adaptation of Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer and Tony Award winning rock opera, "Rent" is now available on DVD.

"Rent" depicts a year in the life of eight friends struggling to live in New York City's East Village. The story is character-narrated by filmmaker Mark who still longs for his ex-girlfriend Maureen, who in turn now has a lesbian lover named Joanne.

Mark's roommate Roger, an HIV-positive musician and former junkie, is dating Mimi, a drug-addicted S&M dancer who is also HIV-positive.

Mark's HIV-positive former roommate, Tom, is a computer

genius having sexual relations with a drag queen street musician named Angel who is also HIV-positive.

Throw in a few more characters and the essential plot is this: starving artists amidst the AIDS epidemic who want to live an untraditional lifestyle while "measuring their lives in love."

Oh, and there is a lot of singing.

I could never decide whether it was Chris Columbus's direction that prevented me from growing an emotional attachment to the characters, or the characters themselves. Regardless, I found the ensemble cast's acting unbelievable, overdramatic and a bit cheesy at times.

I spent the majority of the film trying to figure out why these untalented, middle-class, preten-

tious, self-involved brats felt they were 'suffering artists.' The few pieces they did present as art were unworthy of such a labor. The song Roger took over a year to write is juvenile and cliché ridden, Maureen's performance art was laughable, and Mark's film "Today 4 U," is as bad as the title leads on.

This film fails in several places.

The first and biggest problem is that the characters are never developed properly. They are simply introduced as the lesbian lawyer, the S&M dancer/junkie, and the drag queen street musician.

From there everything falls apart.

Am I supposed to be shocked and moved when a dead Mimi miraculously comes back to life due to the divine intervention of a dead drag queen? When Roger sang "Thank God this moment is not the last," I was disappointed it wasn't over yet.

By over-creating a cast of characters to include every untraditional lifestyle, these lifestyle choices are then put into a negative limelight by association with the characters' downfall. The scenes were over-created as well, coming across as too gritty, with too much graffiti, litter and flaming rubbish.

The DVD offers special features to drag on the spirit of the movie, if you can keep your enthusiasm long enough. Interviews with the director and most of the cast members wrap up this hail to an overdramatic negative-utopian rock opera.

The bottom line is this movie and its group of characters comes across as being too damn lazy to stop pretending that they're aesthetes and get real. Maybe if they would just stop singing for a moment.



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