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**THEATER** BY BRIAN BOONE

## Fools & Foolishness

Shakespeare's canon at the Rep, UT ships out.

In spite of numerous funny moments, Willamette Repertory Theatre's *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, which opened last week at the Hult, is ultimately a jumble of overlong sketches that frantically grasps for the audience's approval. The concept is playful: Three actors (William Mark Hulings, Todd William Denning and Quinn Mattfeld) perform all of the Bard's plays in one evening in order to make them more accessible to a nation they assume lacks the intelligence to comprehend Shakespeare. All but one play is crammed into Act I. Act II consists solely of *Hamlet*.

Act I's vignettes include "Titus Androgynous," a cooking show with Martha Stewart jabs, and a rapped version of *Othello*. These sequences aim for freshness and irreverence, but deliver unimaginative scenarios and jokes even older than Shakespeare. Act II's *Hamlet* involves an audience participation foray into Ophelia's psyche that's almost as tiresome as the Histories-as-Football-Game montage.

But the show has merits. Scenes that work include those that satirize Shakespeare, including the lack of biographical information on him — there's a hilarious bit where Mattfeld transposes Hitler's life story for Shakespeare's — and a scene that points out that *Troilus and Cressida* is a work so forgettable that even a Shakespearean scholar has never read it.

Director Kirk Boyd awkwardly peppers the production with modern references to further the production's aching desire to please. These include nods to Hannibal Lector, the Atkins Diet and at least five jokes about cellular phones. The political mentions are vague shots at Republicans meant to garner applause from the left-ish audience. One bit depicts Julius Caesar as an idiotic man-child. Don't try so hard. Nobody misses the joke.

Though the actors radiate relentless energy and infectious enthusiasm, the performances run a bit on the hammy side. Still, the cast clearly possesses a vast gift for improvisation and is extremely comfortable on stage. *Complete Works* runs through June 1.

University Theatre is set to finish its 93rd season with both an experiment and a milestone. *This Ship of Fools*, opening May 30, is a work devised by theater students and faculty based on Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff*, a 1492 New World satire.

The play also marks University Theatre's 1,000th production. This figure includes all the shows the theater department has produced since its more or less current incarnation with the founding of the Dramatic Club in 1909.

Before Robinson Theatre opened in 1949, plays were staged in Gerlinger Hall, McArthur Court and a small theater built into Johnson Hall in 1915.

### WRT's Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) runs through June 1 at the Hult.

"Prior to 1909, theatricals were produced by various organizations on campus as fundraisers for different projects," says Joseph Gilg, UT development director. "There are records indicating that some of the early shows actually raised money to pay off debts incurred by the football team."

Theater faculty realized that show number 1,000 was coming via the work of Horace Robinson, a UO theater professor from 1933 to 1975. Robinson compiled records of every show produced during his tenure, as well as for all productions dating to 1877.

*This Ship of Fools* is the final show of the Robinson (mainstage) season, following runs of *Chicago*, *Book of Days* and *The Misanthrope*. Though the devised work will differ some from its source material, *Narrenschiff*, the 1492 work, depicts a group of ship-bound fools on a hopeless voyage to a new place, a none-too-subtle dismissal of Columbus's recent New World voyage, implying that the New World is not a solution to humanity's problems, merely a breeding ground for more fools.

"It's a surrealist vaudeville with text almost entirely drawn from or provoked by Brant's book, using only the resources our company can bring, from cheerleading stunts to playing the accordion or the trombone to simple songs accompanied by ukulele," says director John Schmor, who recently helmed *Romeo and Juliet* at Lord Leebrick Theatre Company. "That Brant ended up shaping the very loose narrative to include a ship voyage to 'the new world' opened the text for us to make contemporary references."

*This Ship of Fools* opens May 30 at Robinson Theatre. See calendar next week for details.