

Lord Leebrick Theatre Company

Rebecca Gilman's
Spinning into Butter

"...a play of blistering force."
 --Variety
 "...fresh, eloquent, and candid."
 --Chicago Tribune

February 13 - March 6
 Directed by Joseph Gilg
 With: Dan Flood, Ken Hof,
 Nancy Hopps, Diane Johnson,
 Michael Miranda, Dan Pegoda and Bill Reid

Tickets 465-1506
 540 Charnelton
 Eugene's Premiere Off-Broadway Theatre

American G a d f l y
The Story of Wayne Morse



A one-man play by Charles Deemer
 Starring Claude Offenbacher
 Directed by Sparky J. Roberts

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 Panel Discussion

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 LCC students admitted free with an
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 of Associated Students of Lane
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Supported by Lane Community
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UO THEATRE
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Theater BY KAUKAB JHUMRA SMITH



Deans Strauss (Ken Hof), Kenney (Diane Johnson),
 Daniels (Nancy Hopps) and Prof. Collins (Dan Pegoda)
 puzzle over the offensive notes.

Meltdown

Review

Spinning Into Butter offers more substance than style.

Spinning into Butter is about white, not black, people. Forget about Black History Month — the only colored character you'll see is a "Newyorican" student whose heritage combines New York and Puerto Rican culture. I'd been looking forward to seeing black actors on stage in Eugene. At the very least, I had hoped that a play about racial harassment in a small private Vermont college would show the community most affected by that harassment.

But apparently, that's not the point. *Spinning into Butter* deals with how an all-white college administration handles the case of a shy black student, Simon Brick, who is receiving a steady stream of anonymous harassing notes. Just as several of the college administrators never take the time to actually meet Simon, the audience doesn't get to meet him, either. This is either a great plot ploy or a really big disappointment. For me, it was the latter.

One can argue that not meeting Simon spares him from being used as a token black figure with a singular "black viewpoint" in an all-white world. Yet, for me, it is more offensive to have Simon's words, feelings and actions presented to us through the filter of other actors onstage. I want to meet this young man when the play begins, see how these incidents affect him, and I feel cheated when I do not.

Despite this lack, *Butter* does tackle large controversial issues of race, things we rarely admit to ourselves. Do we, as young Dean Sara Daniels (Nancy Hopps) brutally reveals to her colleague, have a personal system to determine where we sit on a public bus or train? For Daniels, there is a hierarchy of preference — she will first choose to sit next to a white woman, then a white man, or a black woman and very last, a black man. With time, her hierarchy has developed sub-categories, with preference for a white man followed by Asian man, Middle Eastern man, and again last, black man. Some of this dialogue will make people uncomfortable with its open declaration of racial attitudes, especially when Daniels admits she finds black people "stupid and lazy."

Despite walking through a minefield of issues, *Butter* comes across as a rather tepid production. You never truly believe any of the characters are more than actors playing a

part. Hopps displays a limited range of emotions when expressing her frustration at her own attitudes and those of her coworkers. It's also hard to feel the chemistry between her and Ross Collins (Dan Pegoda), a love interest with rapid-fire speech akin to a used car salesman. Ken Hof plays the bigoted Dean Strauss as if doing an overly gruff impression of a cantankerous don at a party.

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But there is real potential for humor in Diane Johnson's role as starchy British Dean Catherine Kenney. Further playing up her deadpan Britishness could create much needed emotional contrast and provide relief from the earnestness — and longwindedness — of the entire production.

Part of the problem may lie with the stilted nature of playwright Rebecca Gilman's script. The other problem may lie with the direction: Actors' hand gestures look repetitive and their movement around the stage desultory and uninspired. They lack the rhythm and cohesion of a cast in stride with each other.

The play uses a single set, the inside of Dean Daniels' office. Larger and deeper than in recent productions, the set places much of the action farther away than necessary and limits actor movement. It also makes actors step unnaturally up or down from one part of Daniel's office to the other. Adding to the general unease is the music: scenes often transition to a tribal African chant, a heavy-handed selection at great odds with the Anglo-dominant administration and even the shy Simon Brick.

Go see this play if you want to be provoked into long, soul-searching discussions about race with your friends. But don't go expecting to see a great production. *Butter* offers some substance but little comfort with its own style.

Directed by Joseph Gilg, *Spinning into Butter* runs at Lord Leebrick through March 6.