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THEater BY KAUKAB JHUMRA SMITH

Susan (Alexis Papedo) is thoroughly kissed by Emily (Jana Schmieding)



Girls Gone Wild

Emily Dickinson, reinterpreted.

Review

Sensual and humorous, *Wild Nights with Emily* is a graceful production that vibrates with energy and wit. Like a scrapbook, it presents complex relationships overlaid with poetry, dance and chamber music to create a unique textured montage that defies conventional wisdom. The jewel-like costumes designed by Harmony Arnold perfectly accentuate the play's triumph.

At question in *Wild Nights* is the legacy of Emily Dickinson, the 19th century poet long depicted as a recluse spinster who scribbled away at thousands of letters and poems in secret. Dickinson's fame came posthumously with the discovery of her manuscripts, but her estate was marred with family struggles over their ownership and publishing rights.

Wild Nights hilariously depicts this wrangling over how Dickinson is to be remembered. It freely moves in and out of Dickinson's life, quoting from letters and poems to set long-accepted "truths" on their head.

Playwright Madeleine Olnek presents Emily (Jana Schmieding) as a woman ardently in love with her childhood friend Susan (Alexis Papedo). Schmieding and Papedo sensitively portray how their relationship blooms from their first tentative kiss to a lifelong love weighed down by social restrictions. Schmieding as Emily is demanding, bold but unsure, while Papedo's Susan is capricious and teasing.

If Emily and Susan had been alive today, they would have been among the same-sex couples in line outside a city hall in their native Massachusetts, demanding a marriage license. This being the 1800s, however, Susan goes on to marry Emily's brother Austin (Chris Hirsh) and builds a house next door. The two women continue their relationship in secret, while Austin's growing suspicion leads to his and Sue's eventual estrangement and his affair with Mabel Todd (Sarah Turnquist).

Some of the funniest and most poignant devices in the play counterpoint modern didactic lectures about Dickinson — "The epitaph 'gay' diminishes Dickinson's significance" — with the flesh-and-blood Emily and Susan sensually frolicking in their love. Olnek, who researched the original Dickinson manuscripts before writing *Wild Nights*, argues that as the eventual editor of Emily's work, Mabel Todd eliminated references to Emily's illicit affair with Sue from

all her poems and letters.

Mabel also creates the myth of Dickinson as uninterested in being published. Passionate and prolific, Olnek's Emily struggles to be heard amid the male writers of her day. As an example of her frustration, Emily relentlessly questions the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* (Ian Armstrong) on the perceived difference between "female authorship" and "authorship." When he suggests elaborate changes to her poems, Emily responds with an ironic "Thank you for your — surgery."

If Emily and Susan had been alive today, they would have been among the same-sex couples ... demanding a marriage license.

Blythe Daniels, Emily Peterson, Steve Wehmeier and Ian Armstrong dazzle in their multiple supporting roles — sometimes in sidesplitting drag — as friends, neighbors and gossips coming on and offstage in a virtual whirlwind. The set is wonderfully varied, and subtle gilt-edges frame the stage so the entire play seems a glimpse into the past.

Produced by a small army of workers, the costumes add a sumptuous dimension to the play. The ladies' silk and brocade skirts are layered in such a mix of weave, pattern and sheen that they seem as textured as the play itself. Susan's rose-peach, flouncy ripeness contrasts with Emily's relative earnestness and the straight blue lines of her shirtwaist. As Emily ages and recluses herself after Sue's marriage to Emily's brother Austin, she begins to live in simple white.

A daring, timely play, *Wild Nights* clearly deserves to be better known and more widely produced in the country. Director John Schmor chose this script because it featured strong roles for young women. Under his agile direction, University Theatre pulls off a demanding production worthy of any major professional company.

Wild Nights with Emily plays at Robinson Theatre through March 13. **EW**

UT is offering a special wedding gift to everyone who has gotten married since March 1 of this year. Bring your marriage certificate to the UO Ticket Office at the EMU (M-F: 9-5), or to the UT Box Office in the Robinson Theatre (after 6:30 on evenings of a performance), and you can get two for the price of one tickets to Wild Nights With Emily for the remaining March 12 and 13 performances. Info: 346-4190.

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