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Neil Simon's

LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR

Directed by Chris Pinto

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High Humor

Skewering McCarthy and NBC on the 23rd floor.

What does Neil Simon have in common with Jerry Springer? He recognizes that to make a profit from television, one must "give the people shit."

Springer, of course, has been providing people with shit since his TV show debuted in 1991. Simon, on the other hand, shows in his play *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* how a TV variety program would rather appear too shrewd for the American public — and slowly bleed to death — than churn out popular but meaningless gunk.

frantic dynamo puffing away on a cigar in his underpants and socks. Despite his Italian Mafioso look, Max has a heart of gold. His red-faced tirades are more of a threat to his office walls than to his beloved staff.

What makes Max so angry is NBC, the show's profit-obsessed network, which wants to cut his budget and air time, pre-approve his scripts, and dumb the show down.

The other thing that makes Max very angry is McCarthy. Max wants to use his

Laughter will leave you in stitches even as you mentally compare the paranoia of the McCarthy era with our current political atmosphere.

Set in the 1950s, *Laughter* will leave you in stitches even as you make mental comparisons between the paranoia of the McCarthyite era and our current political atmosphere. Set entirely in a high-rise office, Simon's quick-witted script is done full justice by an energized comic cast at the Actors Cabaret.

Between bites of bagels and onion rolls, seven comedy writers for a popular weekend broadcast share their discomfort over McCarthy's dealings while trying to one-up each other for the next big joke. To their credit, the actors make each character as distinct and colorful as the baubles on a charm bracelet.

And though they work together like a charm, the writers often clash in their differences too. They include immigrants from Russia (Achilles Massahos) and Ireland (Don Aday), a Jewish hypochondriac (Benjamin Newman), a pregnant woman (Shannon Fabry), a levelheaded "genius boy" (Earl Ruttencutter), an eager newbie (David Thaler), and an out of luck guy (Frank Muhr). Somehow through their dysfunctional harmony they manage to string together an hour and half of great jokes every Saturday night.

The front man for the writers' talent is Max Prince (Patrick Torelle), a drunk, drugged out star with a barrel shaped body and manic energy. Torelle is great as a short

show to make a political statement defying McCarthy and NBC. But when he suggests a skit showing the Statue of Liberty being subpoenaed by "Senator McNutcake," his writers balk in case they are blacklisted as communists.

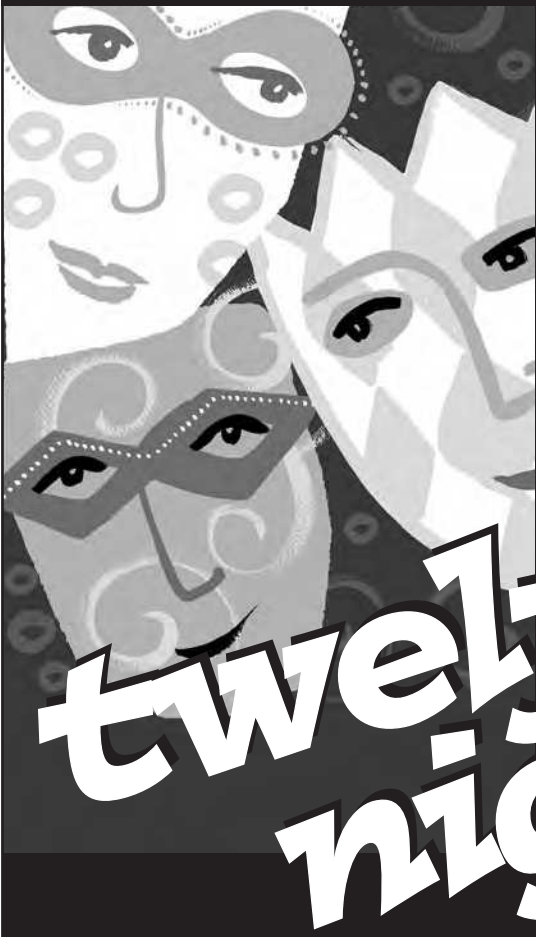
More than once, Torelle's near apoplectic fits as Max — "That's how I feel about McCarthy!" as he punches through a wall — remind you of the visceral rage that a simple reference to our president can induce in many people around Eugene these days.

Packed full of zingers, *Laughter's* fast-paced script is dexterously handled by director Chris Pinto. David Thaler, playing a fresh-faced office newcomer, opens and closes the show with monologues. Though well-rehearsed, Thaler's delivery is green compared to the rest of the veteran cast.

Brette Marie Gentry plays the beatific office secretary Helen with great timing, gently confiding that, you know, she wants to write comedy, too. In one of the play's most electric moments, Benjamin Newman makes a spectacular entrance as Ira Stone, an obnoxious hypochondriac, hacking and coughing in great spasms, shouting medical instructions and moaning himself into a near orgasmic frenzy.

Laughter on the 23rd Floor is great tonic for a stressful week. It runs at ACE through April 24. **CW**

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