

Playing at Real Life

A Life in the Theatre goes backstage.

The Lord Leebrick production of David Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre* offers the audience a snapshot of what goes on behind the curtain — from the anxiety of missed cues and bad reviews to unappreciative audiences and malfunctioning props. But while the play may seem to be an exposé on the theater, the underlying focus is on the mentor/teacher relationship that develops between Robert, a seasoned thespian, and John, a young actor who has recently joined the troupe.

Set in the backstage dressing room of a dingy, dimly lit, second-rate repertory theater, Robert and John perform in one season's worth of productions that include everything from period pieces and war dramas to a play set in a modern-day hospital operating room. These brief and comically melodramatic play-within-a-play scenes alternate with clipped backstage exchanges between Robert and John, who discuss the actor's craft and that evening's performance.

The once close relationship begins to unravel as John's acting career takes off and Robert must come to terms with the inevitable winding down of his own.

For Robert, life and the theater are interchangeable, so when John admits to having onstage jitters, Robert is flattered that the young man has confided in him and welcomes the opportunity to take him under his wing and impart his vast wealth of knowledge. As the season progresses, John's confidence begins to soar and he soon grows weary of the elder actor's lengthy pontifications and controlling behavior. The once close relationship begins to unravel as John's acting career takes off and Robert must come to terms with the inevitable winding down of his own.

Mamet is known for his signature "naturalist" dialogue, which uses the rhythms and syntax of everyday speech to explore the relationship between language and behavior. In *A Life in the Theatre*, this type of dialogue clearly separates the times when the actors are "acting" (the over the top stage performances) from when they are simply communi-

cating with one another backstage. As veteran actor Robert, Ken Hoff does an exceptional job with this technique — from his commanding, role-playing façade at the beginning of the play to his emotional, heartfelt delivery at the end. Likewise, Bruce McArthur's seamless shifts between onstage and offstage persona, as well as his interpretation of the character's transformation from apprehensive newcomer to assured, albeit moderately cocky actor is superb. Indeed, both actors seem to convey an understanding about what life in the theater is like.

Rounding out the cast is Lauren Jost, who as Stage Manager doesn't have any lines to say, but still does plenty "backstage," issuing stage direction, providing props, averting disaster, aiding the actors in quick costume changes and opening and closing the curtain.

The entire production crew deserves recognition, but in particular, the set designers for the spectacular backstage set, complete with its intriguing mishmash of every conceivable costume and prop. *A Life in the Theatre* runs through Feb. 5. **EW**

THEater BY SHARLEEN NELSON

Drawer Boy Raises the Bar

Willamette Rep stretches its wings.

This week Willamette Repertory Theatre brings one of the hottest, most talked-about plays of the last few years to Eugene. Since *Drawer Boy* (pronounced draw-er) opened in Toronto in 1999, the play has won numerous awards, earned rave reviews, and made *Time Magazine's* top 10 list in 2001 when it made its U.S. debut in Chicago.

Drawer Boy, whose title refers to one of the character's love of drawing, was the most produced play in America last year. Director Kirk Boyd said that bringing such a new play to Eugene requires some work. "It's a challenge because it's not well known," he said.

The play is based on a study done by Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. Young actors lived with farm families, labored on the farms and collected stories from people they encountered. The theater company later developed those stories into a collective theatrical production called *The Farm Show*.

Drawer Boy follows a self-absorbed young Toronto actor,

Miles, as he moves in with two middle-aged farmers, Morgan and Angus, to do research for an upcoming role in a play about country life. Morgan is not impressed with the city dweller and Angus,



who suffers from a head injury sustained in WWII, barely recognizes that Miles is even there.

Funny and heartwarming, the play centers around the relationship between the three men as Miles tries to integrate into their country life, botching his chores and trying to collect anecdotes about rural living. Sly twists and turns of plot add to the excellent storytelling as Miles uncovers a painful and secret history. Through that

discovery, his friendship with Morgan and Angus deepens and the rural/urban culture clash disappears.

Boyd hopes that people will be curious enough to check it out. "Horrible title, great play," he said. "It's just awesome. It's kind of a mystery and has wonderful, engaging characters with a great deal of heart." — *Melissa Bearns contributed to this story.*

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