

Stick A Knife In This Play

Overheated Odets at the UO

In the University Theatre Second Season production of *The Big Knife*, Clifford Odets' scathing insider indictment of the post-WWII Hollywood studio system, stardom often comes at a high price. Exposing the dark underside of studios, which owned their stars and treated them as commodities, the play is a cautionary tale, warning would-be stars to be careful what they wish for: Fame isn't all it's cracked up to be.

In a sordid milieu of gossip columnists, powerful men in expensive suits, flattery and deceit, where Tinsel Town stars are blackmailed into studio servitude and their wives take pills to run a little faster and pills to put them to sleep, Mike Hoag plays Charles Castle, an A-list actor and idealist whose values have long been brushed aside for his career. Castle's drinking, carousing and self-destructive behavior have estranged him from his wife and young son. When his studio contract comes up for renewal, his wife Marion (Brittany Bilyeu) begs him, for the sake of their marriage, not to sign. However, studio boss Marcus Hoff (Martin Fogarty) is prepared to play hardball. He has knowledge of a damaging and scandalous secret about the star.



Dixie Evans (Charlotte Gallagher) recoils from Charlie Castle (Mike Hoag)

his portrayal of Charlie's friend Hank Teagle and for Charlotte Gallagher, who plays the ditzy starlet Dixie Evans. Their focus on getting lines out diminishes their ability to effectively convey the personalities of their characters. Standout performances included Brittany Bilyeu, terrific as Charlie's distraught wife Marion. Although petite, Bilyeu is a compelling force on stage. Likewise,

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The play reflects the biases of its era.

Considered one of Odets' minor works, *The Big Knife* is overwritten, overwrought and overflowing with hard-boiled film noir style dialogue reflective of the biases of the era toward African Americans (the hired help is referred to as "the Negroes") and women ("I'm like a girl in a summertime canoe — I can't say no"). Because Odets' script has a forced, artificial quality, none of the dialogue sounds entirely natural; this play may not have been the best choice for student actors.

Mike Hoag's performance as the beleaguered star is mediocre. Throughout his performance of the admittedly verbose script, Hoag seems to be reciting text rather than acting. He does well in the scenes where he's being witty or flip, yet in the climactic ending, his performance fails to capture our sympathy. To be fair, even seasoned actors would have difficulty with this play.

Odets' stilted dialogue also seemed to be a stumbling block for Jason Sample-March in

John Faciane turns out a fine performance as Charlie's old-fashioned southern agent Nat Danziger, and Kevin Coubal is aptly cast as the boss' manipulative and smarmy studio henchmen Smiley Cox; Martin Fogarty is suitably intimidating as studio boss Marcus Hoff and Megan Joy is a delight as spicy temptress Connie Bliss.

Although the play itself is flawed, the production has some things going for it. The costumes are fabulous. From Marion's stylish '50s-era frocks to gossip columnist Patty Benedict's working girl faux leopard stole, they enhance the authenticity of the production. The set, too, is inspired. Modern and functional, the tasteful décor, complete with staircase, a wet bar and a lovely screen that filters through soft light, aptly captures the lavish Hollywood lifestyle of its tormented inhabitants.

EW

The Big Knife continues at the Arena Theatre Feb. 15-17. For tickets, call 346-4363. \$4-\$6.

A Story With Complications

Willamette Rep shines with *Glass Menagerie*

Willamette Repertory Theatre's new production of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams' beloved "memory play," combines stellar direction and nuanced acting to produce a complex standout in the Eugene theater scene.

In Depression-era St. Louis, moody poet Tom Wingfield slaves daily in a warehouse to support shy sister Laura and overbearing mother Amanda in the absence of a father who abandoned his family. Laura possesses a minor limp, and the inner handicap of her social anxiety has prevented Laura from attracting male attention. Amanda works tirelessly to secure a "gentleman caller" for Laura, seeking in matrimony not only a cure for the family's financial situation but a reconnection to the heady days of her own Mississippi youth, when the beaux, she says, were wont to line up on her doorstep. When Tom finally brings home a coworker to introduce to his sister, the family imbues the visit with a forceful, last-ditch hope for domestic happiness.



Tom (Cameron Carlisle) faces off with Amanda (Michelle Morain)

CLIFF COLES

Amanda Wingfield is one of the great *grandes dames* of American theater, leading to far too many underqualified actresses giving the character a shot and a predictable surfeit of melodramatic, faux-antebellum matriarchs. Pleasantly, veteran actress Michelle Morain provides a sensitivity and believability often pointedly missing from the role. The love for her children that supposedly drives the character is genuinely present in Morain's interpretation. In addition, this expatriate southerner enjoyed Morain's flawlessly genteel, biting Deep South accent and bearing, character traits that are often overacted.

Morain is ably matched by a thoughtful cast of proficient actors, including Cameron Carlisle as the tortured Tom and Kimberly Bates as a suitably retiring Laura. Bates succeeds in a nuanced version of a character often relegated to one-note acting, providing depth and context for a realistic and affecting sibling dynamic with Carlisle.

William Mark Hulings may have the most difficult job on stage. As a central symbolic figure, the much hoped-for gentleman caller, Hulings ably treads the line between iconic fantasy and unheeding reality. Hulings' expressive and affable Jim O'Connor lends a heartbreakingly earnest resonance to his scene with Bates, who demonstrates an admirable range portraying the emotions of a young woman beginning to believe once again in a long-dormant dream.

Pat Patton's deft direction locates the action in a specific time and place, convincingly recreating the mores and motivations of prewar America. It's a concrete location for the tale's characters and passions, but with all the tangibility and decisiveness of a long-ago memory.

"In these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is — each other," Amanda clucks at one point. That simple and caring sentiment, however, is betrayed by one of her later lines: "You can't have a story without complications." Willamette Rep's *The Glass Menagerie* is a satisfying tale of the promise of happiness, placed for a brief moment within reach of its protagonists' grasps, making those inevitable complications all the crueler and more poignant. — Aaron Ragan-Fore

The Glass Menagerie continues at the Willamette Rep Feb. 15-18 & 22-25. For tickets, call 682-5000. \$12-\$30.

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