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Oregon Premiere

**The GREAT AMERICAN
PARK
WALKER
MUSICAL**



Music and Lyrics by David Nehls,
Book by Betsy Kelso
Directed by Maida Belove

94.5

**Aug. 31 - Sept. 22, 2007
Fri & Sat at 8:00 PM**

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1626 Willamette, Eugene • 344-8600

THEater BY ANNA GRACE

Vickie (Rebecca Morus), Janet (Charlotte Gallagher), Richard (Jermaine Golden) and William (Joseph Oyala) sing the gender blues



Still Relevant, Still Fun

Free delights the little ones – and their parents

What *EW* reader does not have a dog-eared copy of *Free to Be ... You and Me* smushed into the bookshelf, the accompanying album warping in a parent's garage? *Free to Be* was conceived by actress Marlo Thomas in the early '70s to provide alternative life lessons for her niece. Thomas was joined in her creative endeavor by many friends, including Judy Blum, Carl Reiner and Shel Silverstein. The resulting book sets traditional children's literature on its head. In a series of songs, poems and short stories boys play with dolls and princesses choose their own futures.

The adaptation for stage by Douglas Love and Regina Safran follows William and Janet, two friends growing up, exploring their feelings and questioning society's expectations. They are joined by Richard and

Vickie, kids representing modern stereotypes, and the four children sing, create stories and imaginary worlds, and eventually realize that children are free to be whatever they choose. The show includes the very best from the book, such as "Boy Meets Girl," where two babies are debating the differences between boys and girls, "Parents are People" and "Ladies First," based on Silverstein's poem about a "tender young thing" who always has to go first — even when "first" is into the jaws of a tiger.

Ablly directed by James Engberg, the cast approaches the play as play. Props are made of the toys strewn across the stage, and characters frequently dress up and play pretend. The actors are charming and energetic in their roles. Rebecca Morus nails the obnoxious yet lovable pinafores Vickie. Andrew

Barton gently accompanies the antics of the show with guitar and harmonica and takes a hysterical turn as a less-than-fearsome tiger. There are some wonderfully silly moments, like babies in top hats and bow ties dancing in an infant-meets-vaudeville manner. All but the most jaded 3-6 year-olds will love it.

I was afraid the show might be dated. In 2007, don't all little boys have dolls? What's William's issue in this brave new world of stay-at-home dads? Yet I was surprised by the accuracy of the sports-crazed Richard and shiny-shoe obsessed Victoria. Owen, my 4-year-old son, was on the edge of his pig-and-forest-patterned seat, for gender and what it means are hotly debated concepts on his playgrounds. His favorite character Richard (played on high octane by Jermaine Golden) was still sports-obsessed by the end of the show but had learned the lesson of choice and acceptance. This concept Owen tried to discuss with Golden after the show, but my son was only able to get out a few words before being struck dumb, overcome with awe by the actor. So we've been discussing it at home, which is exactly what this show sets out to do: generate children's thought and questions about gender and society. Pretty cool.

Day Island Park, tucked in along the river just beyond the bridge that leads into Springfield, is a great venue. Do be sure to get a seat up front, as the trees soak up the sound of the piano and guitar. And a note to parents: Just because it is children's theater in a park does not mean it's OK to take a call on your cell, even if you are whispering. It is OK to sing along though! **EW**

Free to Be ... You and Me plays at Island Park at 11 am through Saturday, Aug. 4 and at Amazon Park in Eugene Aug. 7 - 11. Tix available at the door; groups can reserve tickets by calling 346-4192.

Socially Responsible Theater

Anti-war play previews in Eugene

Theaters often go dark for an off-season while people zip off on vacation. But the Lord Leebrick has had quite a summer, what with theater camps, LCC's *Ruby by the River* and now Seattle playwright Elena Hartwell's premiere of *In Our Name*, an anti-war play that heads for the New York International Fringe Festival after one night in Eugene.

Eugene actor Rebecca Nachison (recently seen in *Mother Courage* at the Leebrick), who has worked in theater in NY, Southern Cali and Eugene, stays at the center of attention during the entire piece. Essentially three plays in one, the three near-monologues concern the affects of the war on women (played by Hartwell and Nachison).

But the themes of the performances aren't simple. "It's too easy to comment on statistics and sound-bites," Hartwell says. "Our goal is to remind everyone

that regardless of your political beliefs, it is individuals and their families who pay for our government's actions."

In Our Name came out of a new theater company, Iron Pig. The theatrical folks involved wanted more opportunities in Eugene and out of town, and this piece certainly succeeded: The NY Fringe Fest isn't exactly a small-town event. Still, says Hartwell, "We are both thrilled to perform this piece for the Eugene audience," and the Leebrick's support, she says, "has been invaluable."

Nachison says the experience of delivering three different monologues is both exciting and draining. "The play has been emotionally wrenching for me because I believe so strongly in what it speaks to," she says, adding that she's impressed with the "intimate connection with the audience" created in *In Our Name*.

Unless you're flying to the City for the Festival, head to the Leebrick at 8 pm Saturday, Aug. 4, for the preview. Tix are by donation — and the Leebrick's small, so get there early! More info at the Iron Pig website (www.ironpigpresents.com).

— Suzi Steffen



Opening Nights

The Sisters Rosensweig
Opens at the Very Little Theatre Friday, Aug. 3.

OK, enotes.com calls Wendy Wasserstein's *Sisters* "a play about the transformative power of love, of sisterhood, and of life." A bit gaggy, no? But true fact: Sisterhood, in the feminist meaning of the word, *is* transformative. Let's see what director Maggie Tryk does with the high-energy, New-York-focused script in the steamy dreamy days of a Eugene August. Show dates are Aug. 3-5, 10-12, 16,19 and 23-25. Tix available at www.TheVLT.com or at 344-7751.

Romeo and Juliet
Opens in Amazon Park Saturday, Aug. 4.

Pretty sure no one needs a plot summary here. It's the ninth year of Eugene's Shakespeare in the Park, and while we're not about to challenge Ashland (or maybe even OSU), it's a night of fun for audience and community cast alike, and it's free, always a good thing. Come at 5 pm, an hour before the frighteningly early opening time, to hear "The Story Lady" break it down for the kiddies. (Sex? Suicide? Murder? How to make that easier on the 4-year-olds?) Show dates are Aug. 4-5, 11-12, 18-19 & 25-26. No tix necessary, just a blanket, low chairs, picnic and good attitude.