

VLT's 2007
The Sisters Rosensweig



Not So Little Ambitions

The VLT's theater season thinks big

Don't put down your planning calendar yet! There's more affordable theater in the works, with tales of striving families, bickering families, wild holidays and wild grief coming up at Eugene's Very Little Theatre.

The VLT, a community organization with a dedicated board and a hardworking volunteer staff, continues its 79th (!) season with

Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!*

This 1935 classic should be as fresh and vital today as it was during the Great Depression, when Odets' working-class characters struggled through the daily grind of life as they searched for a way to find the American Dream. This was the play that cemented Odets' fame, and it has been revived on Broadway several times — most recently

in 2006, when its message of immigrants working their tushes off in the midst of economic collapse was all too clearly connected to what's happening 70 years after the play premiered.

Awake and Sing! connects ever so slightly to VLT's season opener from last October, *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, through its awareness of social class and refusal of sentimentality (OK, *Jacques Brel* gives in at the end, but the rest of the songs have some bite). And, if you saw last season's *The Sisters Rosensweig*, you might think of the history of the Rosensweig sisters, what their parents went through in order to give their daughters hope and opportunities (including the opportunities to spit on tradition, of course, and reject their religious and cultural heritage). Even in the Odets play, it's clear that the central Berger family contains cracks and fissures as the children fight for dreams of their own — and economic necessities bear down on everyone. *Awake and Sing!* opens Jan. 18 and runs through Feb. 9.

With a much lighter tone, the VLT opens *On the Razzle*, Tom Stoppard's farce about shop clerks on illicit holiday, March 28 (it runs through April 19). *On the Razzle* might sound familiar to those who know Thornton Wilder's *Merchant of Yonkers* or The

Matchmaker because the source material for all three is a 19th century play by Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy. Stoppard's wit combined with comedic heavy lifting by the cast and a gloriously sparkling set made *On the Razzle* a delight at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival last season. I'm hoping the VLT can pull off the juggling necessary to make this play work without letting the actors harden into overly broad stereotypes (a real risk in community theater, one that director Chris Pinto should fight at every turn).

And just at the end of the rainy season when we long to remember the sun, the VLT opens *The Memory of Water*. It's not related to the weather, of course, but to families and love and tragedy and the pain of loss. VLT does a far better job than any other theater in the area of providing solid, interesting roles for women, and Shelagh Stephenson's "tragic-comedy" serves that purpose well this season with its challenging roles for three sisters mourning the loss of their mother and disagreeing about family history while trying to deal with the present. *Memory* opens May 30 and runs through June 21, just as the sun breaks through the clouds and we all breathe a sigh of relief. The final VLT play of the season, Truman Capote's *Grass Harp*, opens in August just before the other theaters' seasons start again. **EW**

architecture

It Takes a World to Rebuild Berlin

Not to mention some clashing ideologies and a tumbling wall

War is bad for children and other living things — oh, and cities, too. When the rubble gets cleared, every rebuilt brick and concrete slab demonstrates the ways populations choose to view their history.

The UO's Department of Architecture is trying to teach its students to deal with that devastation — and to connect historical rebuilding projects to the wars of today.

On Tuesday, Jan. 8, around 175 people in the UO's Lawrence Hall heard from SUNY history professor Brian Ladd, an expert on the reconstruction of Berlin. At the end of WWII, Berlin was basically destroyed, and Germany squirmed under the world's microscope as Allied soldiers uncovered the mountains of evidence at death camps.

With a capital city in ruins and two clashing superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) fighting over its physical remains and the ideological fallout from the defeat of the Third Reich, postwar Germany had a lot of rebuilding to do. Ladd explained that the reconstruction choices speak volumes about the history of the 20th century.

Ladd's talk was part of a two-year lecture series that began last year with a focus on memory, memorials and museums after war; this term, the series focuses on rebuilding after war or disaster. Series organizer and UO architecture prof Howard Davis says that Ladd, who in 1997 published *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in an Urban Landscape*, started this year with a thoughtful look at a complex topic.

"Berlin is the most visible example of a city that's been destroyed and then rebuilt," Davis says. And he liked having an historian speaking about Berlin because, he says "the architectural history of the city is so connected to the political history."

Davis, who is teaching a seminar in conjunction with the public lecture series (which runs at 7:30 pm every Tuesday through Feb. 19 in 177 Lawrence), says that the issues are timely, and that "students are quite hungry for thinking about what they're doing in connection with what's going on in the real world, things like war and peace or social change."

And indeed, Ladd began studying the reconstruction of Berlin as a student. "It was an extraordinary experience to go to Berlin 20 years ago and find a place where one sensed history was everywhere — and that it really, really mattered." Because the Nazis had particular urban plans under Albert Speer, Ladd says, and because it took a while for West Germany to begin dealing with the consequences of Nazism, "People were fighting constantly about the meaning of



Berlin's Stalinallee

local and national history."

Berlin residents, he said, were "passionately committed to one or another meaning of history and the disposition of particular sites, places and buildings." Both sides — East and West Germany, influenced by the Soviet Union and the U.S., respectively — "had a desire to break with and declare superiority over the Nazi past." But the ways they went about that differed following the war.

Ladd used slides to point out that the image of postwar Berlin, with piles of rubble, looks "unfortunately like many places in the late 20th and early 21st century."

After the Cold War began in earnest with the 1948 blockade of West Berlin (which was located completely in East Germany) and the 1949 Berlin airlift, rebuilding plans became especially contentious.

In East Berlin, which took directives about architectural planning from Moscow, a huge new boulevard called Stalinallee (now Karl-Marx-Allee) reoriented much of the city. The massive apartment buildings on the Stalinallee soon reflected, Ladd said, "the Communists' claims to taking the mantle of German culture and bringing it to new life."

Meanwhile, in West Berlin, architects followed suggestions that refused to orient buildings along a single street. Instead, the razed and rebuilt Hansa quarter was supposed to reflect "the decentralized nature of the free market given physical form."

But after the 1950s, both sides tended towards large apartment buildings to ease housing shortages, Ladd said, which is when East German prefabricated concrete blocks "came under attack for adding to the monotony of street life."

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the focus soon became reunification and an attempt to make Berlin look like a capital city again. However, Ladd pointed out, some of that attempt soon became a look backward at the Berlin of the 1920s — or an attempt to wipe out evidence both of the Nazi regime and of East Germany.

"Reconstruction," Ladd said, "is seen as an act of civic affirmation, which it is, but is also denounced, rightly, as an act of historical denial."

Grad student Nora Driver said that she could relate Ladd's talk to planning in Eugene. "What parts of the past do people want to preserve?" — *Suzi Steffen*

Look for a Q&A with Brian Ladd on blogs.eugeneweekly.com on Friday, Jan. 11. Next week: Hiroo Ichikawa on Tokyo. More info available at aaa.uoregon.edu or 346-3656.