



CLIFF COLES

Out With a Bang

Wild is the right word for *Oats*

Funny? Yes. Poignant? For sure. All of a piece? Nope. But *Wild Oats*, the Willamette Rep's first (and last) full-on collaboration with the UO Department of Theater, serves as a fine and possibly fitting end to the nine-year run of the Equity company.

Of course, it's impossible to review this play without the shadow of sadness hanging over every moment: The Willamette Rep has announced the end of its professional life. In this case, undercapitalized beginnings, a falloff in ticket sales after September 11, 2001 and the impossible space of the Soreng combined with costs of operating in the Hult Center and programming that

never fully hit with Eugene audiences, to eat the company alive. The irony of having *Wild Oats* as the final show becomes clear during a production that waves off Soreng's limitations with an insouciant wink and appears to be drawing a much larger crowd than usual.

Wild Oats was probably Irish playwright John O'Keeffe's most popular play in his day — just before the turn of the 19th century — but fell so thoroughly out of fashion that it was forgotten for more than a century, until a 1976 Royal Shakespeare Company production brought its machinations out of mothballs.

Since then, the play has been staged at Willamette Rep Artistic Director Kirk

Boyd's former Oregon Shakespeare Festival stomping grounds a few times. But the large cast and costume demands perhaps scared off Eugene theater groups until the opportunity for collaboration arose thanks to the UO's "orphan season," so called because the university kicked its mainstage season out while it builds the new Miller Theatre Complex.

This means the UO's many student actors needed something to do. So Boyd, using 19 UO students, a retired UO professor and five professional actors, plus costume and set design by UO pros, set off to provide a comedy that harkens back to lively Restoration and Elizabethan scripts with a joyful flair. Those who love Shakespeare — those who know plays like *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Othello* and most especially *As You Like It* — may expel the heartiest laughter in the house as quotations fly thick and fast, but anyone with a decent sense of humor can enjoy Boyd's staging of this ridiculously overstuffed musical farce.

The plot, too convoluted to recount in any short fashion, involves Sir George Thunder (Bill Hulings) and his son Harry (Kevin Coubal), their cousin, Lady Maria Amaranth Thunder (Meredith C. Ott) and a traveling actor, Jack Rover (Andrew DeRycke). Then ensue mistaken identities, jokes at the expense of a sanctimonious if lascivious Quaker elder, theater students gamboling around the stage pretending to play games as they move UO prof Jerry Hooker's marvelously mobile set ... and of course, a happy ending that ties up every last loose thread. Lovely.

DeRycke, a Seattle-based Equity actor, provides a steady hand at the tiller of this word-drunk vehicle, and Coubal stands out from the UO crowd with his calm

skill. Though the script provides little emotional depth in their first scene, Coubal and DeRycke need somehow to convince the audience of their deep friendship for each other. But in this lengthy romp, that affection eventually becomes more clear.

In a goofy subplot, Sarah Ragle, Daniel Tuch and UO professor emeritus Jack Watson make a fine triangle of preposterousness, but I grew tired of physical and sight gags like the ones that surround Hulings' massive hat (though Hulings himself plays the bluff Sir George with a nicely balanced hearty wink and nudge). And last-minute replacement Jim Bradford as Twitch must stop his uncalled-for mugging and hand-waving. Finally, some of the UO cast members simply aren't up to the demands of this play and suck energy from their dialogue (though the energetic Brittany Bilyeu as Harry's servant Muz counters that trend effectively).

Thanks among other things to DeRycke's astonishing ease in his role, the play survives, thriving somehow in all of the chaos and tangled relationships, music (ably, and often brilliantly, delivered by Ruth Ames and Joel Kenney) and wild costumes by UO professor/costume doyenne Sandy Bonds.

The spectacle of *Wild Oats* isn't meant, like much dramatic theater, to transform the lives of those watching. But in this time of loss, playful theater has a place. This one's for fun, and as the run of *Wild Oats* continues, I'd urge everyone in the area to pack the Soreng for some sorely necessary

EW

Wild Oats continues through April 20. Tix available at www.hultcenter.org or 682-5000.

Waiting for the End

Local playwright's homage to Beckett at LCC

Got restless leg syndrome? If you don't when you walk into *A Soft Kiss While Visiting Samuel*, you'll surely develop it over the course of LCC's current production.

The pains of watching this show might be intentional. Written and directed by Johnny Ormsbee, *Soft Kiss* shows off its origins and Ormsbee's desire to stamp the theater of the absurd with his own ideas and perspective.

Certainly there's some absurdity involved, along with some Extremely Metaphysical Meanings Represented by Doors. And a corpse, or perhaps two or three. And some sexism. And ... well, I suppose college is the right place for this kind of experiment, an indulgent exercise in referential game playing that lets almost all of the actors off leash for a bit too long.

There's something to be said for Ormsbee's perceptive takes on the possibility of neverending grind in long-term relationships and the probability that we'll all experience loneliness, jealousy and a desire to escape something we can never really get away from. Of course, that something has probably been said a few times before. But art doesn't have to (and can't) be entirely original to affect us, and the slow deterioration of Samuel (Dylan Skye Kennedy) and Lizzie (Michelle Nordella)'s relationship becomes a narrative thread that carries much of the first act.

When Dagot (Scott Shirk) enters the scene, the triangulation sets off all kinds of human complications. There's jealousy, storytelling, squabbling and, of course, (there's just no way to do this without capital letters) the Sordid And Unconscious Underbelly of Humanity, represented by Dirty Dagot (Sam Morehouse). When the spunky Lizzie leaves the scene, Samuel quickly finds himself a new distraction, a new ball and chain in the red-dress-clad Cyprian (Barbie Wu).



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Samuel never learns. Humans don't, you know. We repeat our mistakes and struggles, stuck in our existential states, waiting for the release of death even as we fear it.

Just in case you missed those lessons when you read *Waiting for Godot* (hm ... Godot ... Dagot ... hm ...) or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or *The Stranger*, there's a corpse. Excuse me; there's a Corpse (Chip Sherman), always onstage, sometimes

animate, sometimes vocal. And it's in Sherman's role that a regular theater-going audience sees one of Ormsbee's strategies most strongly: Sherman's agile, tough, bendable body flops all over the stage, providing him an opportunity to show off his physical skills and his ability to mimic a deadweight. It's almost like watching a theater class run through various exercises: *This is how you carry another actor. This is how you pretend to be dead. This is how you showcase someone's physical talents.*

Ormsbee has a long history of involvement in local theater. If the half-hostile anonymous eggheads eerily resemble the half-hostile anonymous white-faced folk of the UO's 2007 *Anonymous*, or if Scott Shirk's costume refers to several Very Little Theatre productions (which Ormsbee makes clear with an actual reference to the VLT's current show), or if

Samuel stops the action to have a discussion about the audience with the other actors, no big surprise but, to some members of the audience at least, a delight.

Kennedy, playing the ever present Samuel, does a fine job somehow staying in character even when he's supposed to be switching in and out of reality as he deals with momentary breakdowns in the fourth wall. Despite his extraordinary amount of speaking time, he doesn't stumble, and he delivers cleverish lines like, "What in the name of absurdity is going on?" and "The window of periphescence has passed" with aplomb.

Samuel warns Dagot not to take too much note of the audience: "If they burn you, it is no one's fault but your own." Indeed. Because we're all alone, see. Each of us. And the man in the black hat is coming. — *Suzi Steffen*

Soft Kiss runs through April 12 in LCC's Blue Door Theatre. Tix at 463-5761.