

It's Getting Hot in Here

Young theater company strips down disease and desire in *Beirut*



state where sex is outlawed and people are sent to jail for being provocative. “Beirut” refers to a section of New York City where “Positives” are quarantined, awaiting a cure or the slow death of the disease. Communicable disease is a backdrop for the real story – that of two people, one Positive, one not, desperate for true human connection.

A DIFFICULT PLAY

Raw sexual content, violence against women and angry politics make *Beirut* an uncomfortable show to watch and difficult to stage. Director Leslie Murray has made a point of not pulling back from the shock value, but rather fleshing it out to honor the intent of the playwright, even when it

conflicts with her own values. With Murray giving her actors direction such as “take a longer moment with her ass,” it helps to have comfort levels running high. It is the strongest sense of community among company members that has allowed them to build such a tough play.

For thoughtful Newman to play an angry, diseased misogynist, he channeled his own experience with near crippling depression. His anger at the limitations imposed by disease and frustration as others take it lightly are evident in his work on stage. Tara Wibrew, a strong and confident young woman, is unused to publicly stripping down to her undergarments and begging for a man’s attention. To further explore issues of body image and the line between empowered sexuality and objectification, Wibrew and other cast members took a field trip to a strip club. The play walks a thin line between sex and violence. An emphasis on trust and communication have created a safe rehearsal space for Newman

and Wibrew, so that when the play opens they can give it all the anger, frustration and sexuality the script calls for.

THE FUTURE

This fall most of the company will reconvene in New York, where several members are attending the NYU Tisch School of the Arts in theater. Adding three “offs” to predicate their Broadway, they will be producing Newman’s original work, *The Camel’s Back*. With Trial by Fire’s characteristic embrace of contradiction, the play has stereotypical B-grade action heroes meditating on death and humanity. Think Armageddon with philosophy and a tragic ending. With unabashed, down-home collaborative values guiding them as they hit the fierce theater scene in New York, these young artists are likely to pull off anything they put their collective minds to. **EW**

Beirut opens at 8 pm Wednesday, Aug. 6, at LCC’s Blue Door Theater and continues through Aug. 15. \$5 general admission.

Young, purposeful and passionate, the founding members of Trial by Fire TheatreWorks are bringing New York attitude to Eugene, and their Emerald City roots to the Big Apple. With a base on each coast, this tiny new theater company is blending the best of both worlds into their premiere production, Alan Browne’s in-your-face commentary on AIDS, *Beirut*. Hard-hitting drama amidst a summer of musicals? Small-town theater kids running shows Off Broadway? Old friends and an unwavering belief in the power of live theater work these contradictions in an intense production.

COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION

Trial by Fire TheatreWorks is a collaboration of young artists interested in mixing up performance mediums to present edgy, thought-provoking work. Not-yet-30-year-old artistic director Benjamin Newman believes that if a theater company can start with a community of passionate artists, live theater can be a ritual for both actors and audiences to engage in openness. The roots of some company members trace back to freshman year in Joe Zingo’s drama class at South Eugene High School. Although some members may not share 15 years of memories, throughout the company there is a feeling of kinship. Tight community, Newman believes, will lead to greater trust and honest, challenging collaboration.

Beirut is the company’s first endeavor. Written in 1987, the play takes place in the near future as an unnamed disease ravages the country. America has become a fascist

Kipling Served Up for Kids

Armed with a three-year-old, a five-year-old, snacks and a blanket, I set myself up on a slope at Amazon Park to see UO’s Mad Duckling Theatre present *The Jungle Book*. They have a strong group of actors this year, and I was looking forward to lots of silly animals. Somehow I’d forgotten that Rudyard Kipling was involved.

The original *Jungle Book* is Kipling’s very long series of moralistic stories played out by a variety of animals in the jungles of India. Tim Kelly’s adaptation for stage centers on the stories of Mowgli the “man-cub” (the delightful Annie Rose Favreau), who has been living in the jungle apart from humans since birth. Mowgli and his animal pals are threatened by the clever tiger Shere Khan (Jessie Ryan at her feline best), who intends not only to eat Mowgli but also to upset the power balance of the jungle. Can Mowgli and his animal buddies stop her?

“I saw a tiger and a bear and silly monkeys!” my three-year-old told anyone who would listen. She was not bothered by jungle animals engaging in British-style debates about the nature of good leadership that clearly trash the enfranchisement of the working classes during the Second Industrial Revolution. She just likes seeing Andrew Barton in monkey ears. And honestly, who doesn’t?

So despite preachy lessons about facing your fears and the negative effects of littering, the talented cast managed to keep the audience’s attention with big chase scenes and frequent audience participation. Steve Wehmeier has a wonderful presence as the Great Wolf, and the kids loved energetic Annie Rose Favreau as Mowgli. Jermaine Golden made a memorable cameo as an expressive tree. There is plenty of action and a hysterical slow-motion fight scene, and you will love the silly monkeys.

While this is not the best production I’ve seen from Mad Duckling, it is certainly worth the price of admission and the bag of trail mix you may want to bring along. — Anna Grace

The Jungle Book runs July 31 and Aug. 1-2 and 5-9. For tix, call 346-4192.

Opening Nights

FOREVER PLAID opens Friday, Aug. 1, at the Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove.

Four young male singers in the 1950s die in a car crash. Funny stuff, no? Well, apparently, *Forever Plaid* – in which the boys come back to sort-of life to pursue their dreams of competition wins and bobby-soxers at the sock hop – leaves audiences worn out from laughing at the hijinks of the wacky, tightly harmonic quartet. Show dates are Aug. 1-3, 8-10 & 14-17. Tix at www.cottagetheatre.org or 942-8001.

THE GRASS HARP opens Friday, Aug. 1, at the Very Little Theatre.

The last VLT show of the venerable company’s 79th season features the Southern-Gothic-collides-with-Southern-Cute side of Truman Capote. With rural folks against a city slicker and a varied plot run by a rather evil sister against a rather good sister, not to mention the teenager and the maid in the middle, *Grass Harp* pretty much has it all. All if you like quirky, complex tales of the small town South – and when Capote’s writing them, who doesn’t like these tales? Show dates are Aug. 1-3, 8-10, 14-17 & 21-24. Tix at 344-7751.

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