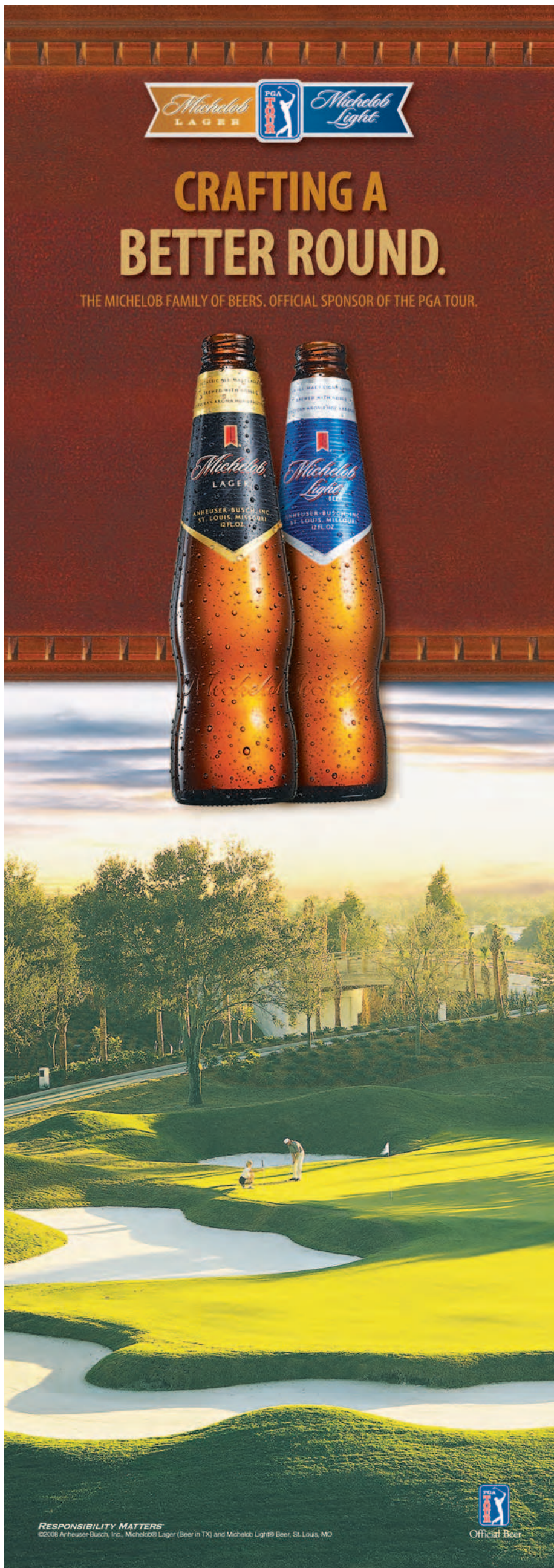




Theater BY ANNA GRACE

Gloria Lagalo, Brett French,
Barry Carroll and Toni Latson

JOHN BAUCUES



Truman Capote, VLT Style

Stagey focus leaves gaps in *Grass Harp*

Family drama, magical cures, a rebellious sojourn in a treehouse all presented under the veil of Southern peculiarity: The Very Little Theatre presents a traditional staging of Truman Capote's sweet play but doesn't quite manage to capture the audience's imagination.

Set in Alabama in the 1930s, *The Grass Harp* is loosely based on Capote's childhood experiences. Fifteen-year-old Collin (Brett French) is sent to live in a houseful of women, made up of Aunt Dolly (Gloria Lagalo) of a sweet and gentle disposition, Aunt Verena (Lorna Bridges), who's controlling and angry, and their unconventional servant Catherine (Toni Latson). Dolly, with the help of Collin and Catherine, has created an effective cure for dropsy. Verena brings in questionable Dr. Morris Ritz (Adam Leonard) who wants to buy the recipe to the dropsy cure, leading to a series of events that shock the town and threaten to destroy the family. Part adventure, part family drama, part philosophical musing, this play is an odd slice of small town Southern life.

Truman Capote's remarkable style captures the insignificant, improbable dramas that are our lives. He is able to make the gathering of nuts for fruitcake an epic adventure. In this script he faithfully re-creates the conversations of a town where trivial topics lead into life-altering debates on the nature of existence and then fade back into minutiae. The dialogue is difficult, and the actors do not always handle it successfully. Some actors seem uncomfortable with the fits and starts, the humor intruding on drama. Unable to commit to the whimsy of their lines, they sound stilted and awkward. Yet others soar with the prose: Toni Latson as Catherine has the best lines of the play and by far the best handle on delivery.

Direction by Suzanne Shapiro emphasizes the theatricality of the piece. There is never

a moment you forget you are watching a play. From a delightful series of small town reactions to Dolly's disappearance to characters of a certain age debating the nature of love as twilight falls, this really feels like mid-20th century theater. Traditional forms of staging, such as allowing an actor to wander during a monologue while the other characters remain seated sitcom style around three sides of a dining table, call attention to the primacy of the words. The set itself evokes tradition, VLT's sweet proscenium framing a wonderful treehouse. Yet there were also unpleasant reminders of the stage such as actors seeming unsure of their lines and sound cues coming in at the wrong times.

Staging *Grass Harp* without the tricks and gritty reality of modern theater may remain true to the era in which it was written, but it does not always make the play accessible to a modern audience. Particularly hard to translate is the character of Dolly. Weak and eager to please, Dolly is an accidental spinster whose first loves include honeycombs and the color pink. A protagonist so light and fluffy is difficult to care about. Gloria Lagalo captured her delicacy and indecision, but in the end Dolly's ruffles and accent began to grate on my nerves, making me wish her mean-spirited sister was the protagonist. Lorna Bridges is a magnificent Verena, completely real as a woman forced into a life where she has to work so much harder and be so much stronger than she ever wanted to be. It was her plight that touched me.

The Grass Harp is a pleasant way to spend two hours. The production is very pretty, and Capote's language is always a pleasure, but I was not transported to the South of the 1930s. I was sitting in the confines of the VLT, watching a play. **EW**

The Grass Harp runs through Aug. 23. Tix at 344-7751.

Opening Nights

Knock 'Em Dead opens Friday, Aug. 8, at the Majestic Theatre in Corvallis. Help solve this comedy murder mystery mash-up. Yep, that's right, this show involves audience participation. Show dates are Aug. 14-17. Tix at www.oregonstate.edu/dept/theatre or 541-737-2784.

The Mikado opens Thursday, Aug. 14, at the OSU Theatre in Corvallis. Questionable choice of a Gilbert & Sullivan here, but hey, it's summer, why worry about those ethnic prejudice questions? After all, it has good songs. Show dates are Aug. 8-10 & 14-17. Tix at www.corvalliscommunitytheatre.org or 541-738-7469.