



# WORDS TO CONNECT AND HEAL

Ecological theater takes over the UO campus By Suzi Steffen

**A** river runs through the floor of the theater. Is it blood running through veins; sap running through trees; the electrical impulses that connect past to present, the planet to the people on it, the living to the dead?

Kind of heavy questions for the little space on the UO campus. But those involved with the Earth Matters On Stage festival can't wait to take them on. The answers will shift and change with the two award-winning new plays produced during the festival in the even newer Hope Theatre.

A good night of theater can transform an audience, not to mention those involved with the play. The characters — turning, dancing, grieving, fighting, loving — cut through defenses to touch tender, anguished, human hearts. In what organizers call this “ecodrama” fest, a good night of theater weaves strands of community and awareness into the transformative artistic experience.

Nothing's quite complete at a university unless it comes with analysis, and Earth Matters doesn't fall short either on performance or on thoughts about how to understand that performance. During the 11 days the festival runs, it offers something for just about anyone who cares about the planet. Festival director and theater prof Theresa May can hardly keep

track of the massive schedule even with her considerably organized spreadsheets and web page ([www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama](http://www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama)). Times and plans and a cycle of events pack the hours.

Bring a highlighter when you snag the program. The festival teems with ideas about theater and the planet: a talk by a pioneer of performance art; professional theater folk from Portland and Ashland; ecotheater experts; a day devoted to environmental theater by Native Americans; workshops, speakers, yoga and performance art. If you missed the UO's *Metamorphoses*, there's even a special revival production in the Robinson Theatre on May 24. The (literal) tons of water onstage will look different, the actors moving through the pool cast in an altered light, under the glow of the festival's gaze. And LCC revives Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* for Memorial Day (May 25) and the night after.

But let's get back to that river, the plays that lie at the festival's beating heart: two full scripts picked out of the pack submitted to the Earth Matters competition. Each centers around love, tenuous connections, loss and a thin thread of hope. The competition's first prize winner is *Song of Extinction* by EM Lewis, and the second prize is *Atomic Farmgirl*, by C. Denby Swanson.

The idea of ecodrama isn't new. In 2004

at Humboldt State University, Theresa May and her husband/collaborator Larry Fried (now a familiar face in Eugene's theater scene) put on an Earth Matters whose core was a festival of new plays. In the UO's case, an international playwriting competition brought in 158 scripts. From a narrowed group of finalists, outside judges selected the winning plays.

*Song of Extinction* has piled up various awards since its first days on the competition circuit, the most recent American Theatre Critics Award at the recent Humana Festival. Lewis describes it quickly as “a play about a boy who is dealing with the death of his mother and the teacher who reaches out to him and reluctantly ends up trying to help him,” but that's not how the play began its life.

“There are several big science initiatives for playwrights out there,” Lewis said during a phone interview. Apparently, plays with working scientists in them aren't as common as scientists and engineers would like. “I thought, ‘I should write a science play!’ and ‘Wow, I don't know anything about science,’” Lewis said. But suddenly all of the characters appeared in her head. “I had no idea where they were going to go, but from that first crystal moment, I knew who they were and who they were to each other,” she said. “Then it was a matter of following their journeys through the

course of the play.”

Instant characters notwithstanding, Lewis did plenty of research to understand those characters and their intentions. There's 15-year-old Max, a musical genius who carries his viola wherever he goes; his mother Lily, who writes high school science textbooks and who's dying of stomach cancer; his father, Ellery, a biologist who researches insects in the Bolivian forest; and Khim, Max's high school biology teacher, a survivor of genocide in Cambodia. And there's industrialist Gill, whose company has bought the forest where Ellery's insect lives and who plans to log it, providing work and clearing land for many Bolivians. The idea of jobs vs. the environment isn't new to Lewis, who grew up in Oregon and heard all of the arguments of the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Song of Extinction* is set in Portland. Lewis, who now lives in Santa Monica, Calif., was raised near Woodburn and Salem on what she calls a “fourth-generation family farm.”

A real-life fourth-generation family farm, this one in Eastern Washington, features in the second play, *Atomic Farmgirl*. Playwright C. Denby Swanson adapted the multi-character play from Teri Hein's book of the same name. Anyone who listens to or reads the news of our area will know some details about the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, not to mention a bit