

Simply Swell in Connecticut

OFAM opens feisty production of Rodgers & Hart masterpiece

A WWII American naval officer wakes up in King Arthur's court. This mischievous hep cat can't go five minutes in Camelot without introducing slang and jazz, not to mention stirring up trouble with a local damsel.

By day two, he's hoodwinked the king into giving him a title and has begun a program of industrialization, leading the legendary folk down the road to all the societal mayhem that innovation and mass production wrought in his own time. This is *A Connecticut Yankee*, a 1927 and 1943 update on the 1889 Mark Twain novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The 1943 Rodgers and Hart revamp version is a swingin' blend of satire and sentiment. A couple of standards came out of this show ("Thou Swell" and "My Heart Stood Still"), and a number of forgotten gems lie buried within the score.

The Oregon Festival of American Music is committed to keeping the tradition of lesser-known 1920-1930s era musical comedies alive, says the Shedd's James Ralph (the Shedd produces OFAM every year; see Brett Campbell's music story, p. 24). These simpler shows do not inspire the awe of Golden Age musicals like *Show Boat* or OFAM's other musical this year, *Oklahoma!* But producer Ralph says that comparing the two genres is "a little like criticizing pinot gris because it isn't cabernet sauvignon." A good cab can knock your socks off, but that doesn't mean you won't be sipping on something light and simple as you enjoy a warm breeze on your balcony in August.

Take some of Eugene's erudite musical theater professionals and imbue them with the spirit of a group of 8-year-olds saying, "Let's put on a play!" and you have your production team for *Yankee*. Veteran director Judith

"Sparky" Roberts is confident this show has no weak links as she works with local powerhouses like musical director Vicki Brabham and choreographer Laura Hiszczynskij. The group has to rise to the task of putting on an authentic production of a show none of them has seen or heard before.

There are no audio recordings of the score, no big budget Hollywood standard to rent. Every dance had to be created within the confines of the play's historic context. The book's language won't be updated but must be made comprehensible to modern audiences. If the energy and talent of the almost entirely local cast I witnessed at a rehearsal are any indication of the quality of the upcoming show, I would advise the reader to get tickets now.

The venerable old Baptist church that has become the Shedd's Jacqua Concert Hall makes a wonderful concert space, but can it act? Yes. Intimate and elegant, the former sanctuary feels sacred, a feeling that harkens back to the roots of western theater in Greek worship practices. It mirrors the near-reverential feelings the production teams hold for their work. While many changes have been made to make the space a theater (the former organ loft was cleared in order to host a 20-piece orchestra) it retains an old fashioned feel. In keeping with OFAM's mission of authenticity, this show will be done with acoustic instrumentation.

This year's festival theme is "Time After Time: Great Moments in American Songbook History." The "moment" of this play is 1943, which Ralph calls a watershed year. The revival of *A Connecticut Yankee* marked the end of composer Richard Rodgers' extraordinary partnership with Lorenz Hart. That year also marks the end of the early form of American musical comedy, as Rodgers' smash hit *Oklahoma!* (his first



A wizard and Vivian Segal in 1943's *Connecticut Yankee*

COURTESY JAMES O. RALPH & THE SHEDD

collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein) changed the way Americans expected their musicals to look and sound. OFAM allows us to see the two partnerships and the two forms of musical theater produced back to back.

Do some time travelling of your own this summer along with OFAM. It'll be swell. **EW**

A Connecticut Yankee opens Friday, July 24, at the Shedd and continues July 25-26 and Aug. 1-2 & 8-9. Oklahoma! opens Friday, July 31, at the Hult and continues Aug. 2, 7 & 9. Visit www.ofam.org or call 434-7000 for more info and tix.

The Potters' Quarter

PAINT YOUR OWN

SUMMER SPECIAL

SAVE \$4 ON ANY PROJECT OVER \$13

With this coupon

Offer Expires: August 31, 2009. One coupon per person, not valid on Ladies' Night, Parties or with any other discounts

ALL AGES WELCOME

110 Oakway Ctr Eugene, OR 97401 (541) 434-9277

Sign and Date: _____ Total Purchase: \$ _____

20th Annual

OBON FESTIVAL

Saturday, July 25, 2009

Alton Baker Park, Eugene, Oregon 5 to 9 pm

Enjoy this **FREE** event featuring Japanese folk dance (audience participation encouraged)

Taiko drumming by our own Eugene Taiko and Waka Daiko

Arts, Crafts, and Food!

Bring a lawn chair or blanket.

Sponsored by JAA and the City of Eugene

For details call (541) 688-4492

Mad Duckling Children's Theatre

The Old Man Who Loved Cheese

Adaptation, Music and Libretto by Edward Barnes

From the book by Garrison Keillor

At Amazon Park

July 28-Aug. 1 & Aug. 4-8

performances begin 11 AM

\$5 tickets at the door

Group reservations and information at 346-4192

Produced in partnership with City of Eugene Recreation Services

CITY OF EUGENE recreation SERVICES

KLCC 89.7