

The Power of Television

Strong direction, acting gives glow to *The Ruby Sunrise*

The barn and everything in it, including Ruby's prototype for the first television, is set ablaze. Why? Because she failed, or because she even tried to begin with?

The Ruby Sunrise takes a very small, hugely important corner of history and illuminates it in light of censorship, prejudice and fear. Television — the transmission of sound and pictures over the air — was invented in 1927 by a few well-funded men. Rinne Groff's script imagines a 17-year-old girl with the same dream, twice the determination and everything in the world stacked against her.

The play is divided into three parts: The first section takes place in rural Indiana in 1927; part two is set in New York City in 1952; the final act melds the two times and places with the device of a television drama. It is an interestingly, if obviously, crafted play. The initial awkwardness pays off, by virtue of thoughtful performances and compelling direction.

Part One: Ruby (Jessica Svetal) is racing to create the first television, seemingly unaware that she is a teenage girl lacking the adequate resources. Her only battle is against time — not against the aunt who doesn't want her, the abusive father she's fleeing or the lovesick college boy who follows her around, begging her to stop inventing.

Director Chris McVay paints a veneer of heightened theatricality over the awkward,

staccato dialogue punctuated by long lumps of technical jargon flopping out. Brandon Rumsey's original score directs emotions and places focus, but at some points forces the actors to shout, pushing the audience out of the story and back into their seats. The single-minded technical diatribes of inventor Ruby, the maudlin, drunken waxings of Aunt Lois and the confused confessions of love from Henry all play like a melodramatic screenplay. The audience waits, assuming all will be made clear. It is.

Part Two: We are snapped out of the drama and into the witty world of a new television studio, circa 1952. Ruby's daughter Lulu (a perfectly cast Leela Gouveia) has landed herself a job as a script coordinator and works to get her mother's story told. The labored conversations of part one are replaced by clipped, cheerful chitchat reminiscent of a Tracey/Hepburn film. This part feels hopeful, as though Ruby and her dreams will live on. The actors flesh out the joyousness and humor. Chris Pinto is *funny*, working the lines of Martin Marcus, the pragmatic producer. Bruce McArthur is smooth as the gifted screenwriter falling in love with the gifted script girl. Everything is just delightful. Until it isn't.

Part Three: Groff's script hauls us out of the cheery world of detergent-selling pitches into the era of McCarthyism and censorship. Lulu unexpectedly explodes and is fired when the boys begin to tinker



Joseph Tanner Paul, Jessica Svetal and Rebecca Nachison in *The Ruby Sunrise*

with her script in a manner she finds insulting to her mother's memory. Groff's moral indignation runs across the stage like broad strokes of crayon as the actors struggle to keep it real.

A real appreciation for the actors in part one grows as they return in roles playing their former selves. Particularly moving are Rebecca Nachison as the aging star Ethel Reed, and Jessica Svetal, a blacklisted actress prevented from the role she's born to play. Honest emotion keeps the action rolling until the script wends its way to a satisfying conclusion.

The Ruby Sunrise is not a tragedy. Neither of the strong-willed women gets what she wants, and the play contrasts how individually they deal with their disappointment. The struggle to succeed against the odds is depicted in a refreshing and charming manner, examining the issue of when to compromise and when to fight. Director McVay both focuses and softens the imperfect script, eking out an important story that is well worth seeing.

The Ruby Sunrise plays at the Very Little Theatre through June 11; tickets and info at www.thevlt.com

See a Play, Save the World

Salmon is Everything goes to the heart of the matter

On the banks on the Klamath River, 75,000 salmon lay rotting. The stench of dead fish permeates every home and looms over the stalemated battle for water rights. Tension has been building for more than 100 years, as misguided governmental policy brings fourth a host of social problems, including the stratification of the rancher and native populations. This catastrophe was built by human hands and exacerbated by greed, and it threatens to wipe out the last of a 10,000-year-old culture.

This is not the description of a cleverly constructed plot, but the drama of our own history, as told by Theresa May and the Klamath Theatre Project in *Salmon is Everything*. This is a play for the curious. If you feel like grappling emotionally with a complex situation and stretching your understanding of how we are connected with the land supporting us, this is the production to see. Purchase a ticket and prepare to learn.

The Klamath River is dammed; water is diverted to irrigate the farms growing potato, alfalfa and hay. When the water runs low, the temperature of the river rises, making the salmon susceptible to disease. In 2002, 75,000 salmon died, washing up on shore to rot. Director/creator/chief imaginer Theresa May was working then as an assistant professor at Humboldt State University, and was determined to use the medium of theater to address the tragedy.

Her drive inspired two years of collaborative work with all major stakeholders, from Native fishermen to third generation ranchers, resulting in a theatrical experience that combines biology, anthropology, political science and theology to explain the meaning of salmon.

Storytelling, the drama of a town hall meeting, indigenous dance, even a flashily lit "salmon rap" are all woven together. This is not straight theater. For many of the people performing, this is their first time on stage. Here, theater is used as the means to solve a problem. Audiences are advised to put aside their expectations and simply listen.

Complex characters illuminate the issue of water rights from many angles. Julie (the engaging Shayleen Macy), a member of the Karuk and Yurok tribes, dances between the culture of her home and the pressures of the outside world, struggling to give voice to her concerns for the survival of her people. Kunu Dittmer brings energetic gravitas to Julie's Yurok-Karuk fisherman husband, Will. Martin Diaz-Valdes plays an entrenched upper Klamath rancher with dignity and humanity. Sarah Ruggles is wonderful as the dreadlocked do-gooder biologist, so caught up in the controversy of salmon that it brings her to question her own faith in the primacy of facts, data and the proper path for social change. And throughout all the action and drama, Maia Luer appears and disappears as the elegant, illusive Salmon Dancer.

Together, this cast educates the audience on a fascinating and difficult topic. Ordinarily, such lessons are transmitted and understood through our minds. Facts are laid out and weighed and we shake our heads saying, "Gosh, too bad about the salmon." This production, while by no means lacking in information, is told through the heart. If you go, you will get it. *Salmon is everything.* — Anna Grace

Salmon is Everything plays at the University Theatre through June 4; for info and tickets, visit pages.uoregon.edu/theatre or call 346-4191.

Authentic Glee-Style Grooviness

You're not addicted to Glee, right? You can quit anytime, but why should you? There's nothing to be ashamed of, just because you rush to your sofa every Tuesday night to watch angst-ridden teenagers belt out show tunes.

Since you're so secure in your Gleekdom, check out *Don't Stop Believin'*; the production is a benefit concert for Rose Children's Theater. Rather than thirteen kids, you get 37, all singing their hearts out. The day I stopped by rehearsal, every young soul between the ages of 9 and 18 was totes on. My reactions ranged from "Awww!" to "Wow!" as I witnessed exuberance being honed into skill.

Evyne Hollens, herself an adorable cross between Mr. Schuester and Miss Pillsbury, directs the kids with understanding and respect. She'll interrupt the pulsating bundle of youth to demand perfect articulation and tonal accuracy, following her clipped command with, "Cool? Now you're really rockin' out!"

"I love doing this," Hollens says of her third consecutive year directing a Glee-style review. "It's important to highlight the talents of these kids."

They will be rocking your favorites: "Bad Romance," "Singin' in the Rain" (yep, there will be water), "Bust a Move" and, natch, "Don't Stop Believin'." Gleek out.

Glee: Don't Stop Believin' plays Friday, June 3, at 8pm and Sunday, June 5, at 2pm at the Wildish Theater; for tickets and info, visit www.thertc.com — Anna Grace