

Steam-Punk Sex Farce

Local director gets funky with *The Underpants*



The script – Steve Martin’s rewrite of a German sex farce. Droll and just a little bit naughty, it’s exactly the type of play that sells a heap of tickets.

Johnny Ormsbee is a young director better known for exploring universal truth through unorthodox theatrical experiences than finding fun in a stock sex farce. But pair the two and you get the Very Little Theater’s latest offering, *The Underpants*, a traditional comedy gone wild with kazoo-playing gypsies.

I sat down with Ormsbee last week at Allan Bros. to discuss his latest project and uncover what happens when an experimental director picks up a conventional script.

What happens? Things get crazy. Finding inspiration in everything from surrealist painters to Charlie Chaplin’s classic film *Modern Times*, Ormsbee and cast have radically altered the intentions and moods existing in the original script, and they channel a steam-punk vibe for the set and costumes. They even tweak the “winner” at the end, hoping to conclude on a somber note.

Ormsbee says any play is open to interpretation. “We

look at the script and see if it warrants any addition,” he explains. “A good script should be able to change with the times.”

If you’ve visited Ashland during these “Bill Rauch” years, you’ve seen ample examples of using texts as a jumping-off point to tell a different story. It’s a brave – and often controversial – gambit.

“It’s been rumored that we’ve gone over the top,” Ormsbee says. “I don’t feel as though we’ve gone too far, but we might have,” he adds, noting that VLT audiences might draw the line at “humping chairs.”

This chair-humping business, along with the Tim Burton-esque costumes and a wicked-wild set, has raised more than a few eyebrows. Ormsbee is not deterred. “I’m interested in getting people out of their boxes,” he says. “We need to mix it up.”

And mix it up he does, with a cast comprised of newcomers to the VLT mainstage, although the actors are by no means unknown to the local theater scene. A carnival feel is evoked with live music that leans heavily on kazoos and tin cans. Ormsbee describes this music as “junk band gypsy folk rock.”

Are the actors on board? “They are very excited,” he says. “We are going to try to do the best show Eugene has ever seen.”

Getting actors to commit to the surreal is Ormsbee’s gift. Starting the current rehearsal process with a bawdy Martha Stewart joke, Ormsbee has tried to lead a truly collaborative effort. “They’ve taken my vision and lifted it with me,” he says.

The Underpants promises to be a unique and ultimately human experience. Ormsbee points out that comedy is one of the few art forms that embraces us as physical beings, completely in and of our bodies. “We regurgitate, we defecate, we have sex,” he says. “Comedy allows us to leave the phallogocentric world of the English language and be human.”

Whether the play (re)connects you with yourself or just makes you laugh for a couple of hours, it offers the chance for some bawdy entertainment. Come watch – who knows what will happen?

In Ormsbee’s words: “I would ask audiences to open themselves up to the idea of being able to see the world in a different light.” – *Anna Grace*

The Underpants opens Friday, Jan. 13, and runs through Jan. 28; for times, tickets or further info, visit theVLT.com or call 344-7741; \$10-\$15.

arts

SHORTS

Expression, Occupied

The upcoming benefit for Occupy Eugene, appropriately named “**Occupy Free Expression**,” is a testament to how well OE can channel local talent and creativity into an articulate platform for social change.

The event will feature talent from Occupy emcee Plaedo Wellman to other local slam fixtures. The evening will begin with more formal poetry readings and segue into the harder-hitting, more gut-wrenching material.

“I think that ideas about social, political and economic reforms have a much greater chance of being understood and appreciated by more people and absorbed into our culture and daily life when those ideas are converted into artistic expression,” wrote event organizer Jennifer Frenzer-Knowlton.

Historically, most successful revolutions are backed by those capable of expressing the plight of the oppressed in a more abstract, perhaps more approachable way than by marching through streets or chanting slogans. Eugene is fortunate to have such spokespeople and artists like Wellman, who can stitch social change together with spoken word to capture the heartfelt earnestness of oppression that oftentimes is lost in more traditional forms of protest.

“Culture provides meaning and it provides context,” says Wellman. “I think that by having an evening, an event with poets to speak, we are giving a context that provides meaning for Occupy and for people that are politically informed or socially informed, people that want to make changes in the way we live our lives. And structural changes to the way we organize our system.”

“Occupy Free Expression: An Occupy Eugene Benefit Event” will take place on Sunday, Jan. 15, 4-6 pm at Tsunami Books. – *Andrew Hitz*

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By Steve Martin
Directed by Johnny Ormsbee

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