

Nickeled and Dimed

The play's refrain echoes over the audience, as though repeating the words enough times will make it true: "Make it so life ain't printed on dollar bills."

More than a play, Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!* – now running at UO's University Theatre – is a moving lesson in economic theory cloaked in the domestic passions of one Depression Era working class family. Through a series of raging family conflicts, the gaping flaws in capitalism are exposed and chewed over. Dark secrets are revealed, dreams are crushed and everyone behaves badly, though in the end everything circles back to one family gripped in the claws of economic necessity.

Odets assembles and shuffles his characters to best expose the human offspring of laissez-faire capitalism. From the bootstrap businessman Uncle Morty (Steve Wehmeier) to the Marxist-espousing Grandpa (a marvelous Jonas D. Israel) to the opportunistic, quasi-legit war veteran Moe (Kyle Leibovitch), everyone has his angle on money, and all have their failings.

Erica Jorgensen emerges as a serious young talent in the role of Bessie, the domineering mother whose anger, fear and disappointment are like a whirlpool, sucking everyone in. Just when Bessie has monopolized the hatred of the audience she reveals a flash of smothered humanity, and her actions become the fault of the world that's trapped her. Playing her son with palpable desperation is Ryan Dougherty.

Colin Lawrence's inspired set works to box in all these characters; splitting the audience down the middle is the narrow, crowded apartment, with dark ceiling molding hanging oppressively over the action.

Director Damond Morris' production is conscientiously relevant, comparing the caged family with today's designated "99 percent" left out in the cold by severe economic inequality. Morris is right to do this, of course, but the comparison isn't right on. Odets wrote *Awake and Sing!* in 1935, when American capitalism was in freefall. Socialism is a legitimate option for the play's characters, for instance, and a young woman's "happy" ending involves a man who has recently threatened to break her arm. But the message, that life shouldn't be centered on the dollar bill, still stands firm. – Anna Grace

Awake and Sing! runs Jan. 26-Feb. 4 at University Theatre; <http://tickets.uoregon.edu/theater/>

**Damond Morris directs
University Theatre's production
of Clifford Odets' *Awake & Sing***



Exploding Something or Other

Just how bad is *Exploding Love*, the play? It is so miserably and flatulently bad, in fact, that it's nearly inconceivable *Exploding Love*, the actual current LCC student production directed by Michael Watkins, could not also be bad. We're talking inevitably, ineluctably bad, as in lipstick-on-pig bad. Not just ungood, but bad. Awful.

Written by Joseph Coyne, this one-act romantic comedy debuted in 1997 at the (unsurprisingly) now defunct Key West Theatre Festival in Florida, and – judging from a fairly futile on-line search – hasn't enjoyed much of a run anywhere else. For that reason alone, LCC's Student Productions Association should be lauded for eking anything at all out of a thing so unworkable and emetic.

The plot/premise/punchline of *Sploding Love* does not altogether lack promise: An affianced couple – groom Rory (Dawson Yukon Shadd) and bride Fran (Samantha Rose White) enter a county courthouse to secure their nuptials; inside the men's room, Rory encounters cosmic lovechild Zeke (Sean Dugan) and a guy named Skeeter (Joseph Tanner Paul), an angry, jilted man strapped with explosives and taking hostages as a lure to getting his ex-wife Winona (Megan Simon) down from her perch in the tree outside the courthouse and, finally, back into marriage. Of course, this being a rom-com, each character has her opposite number and potential true love, which here includes a female Officer (Polly Bond) and yet another Fiancé (Nathan Rogers), along with a Detective (Kenny Stuck) trying to defuse the situation from outside the courthouse window.

From this mélange emerges one and only one very funny line ("Does that little light in the refrigerator really turn off when you close the door?") that is packed like a shiny bauble within the excelsior of truly piss-poor comedy – as in predictable, obvious, hoary, sexist, silly and philosophically shallow. None of these qualities, taken individually, need, in and of themselves, necessarily scuttle a production. Bunched as a whole, however, they point to an inartistic and impolitic breed of addled hauteur, a kind of Frankensteinian confusion that borrows the limbs and appendages of various comic forms and then stitches them together willy-nilly.

The resulting monster is an ersatz hodgepodge with a questionable reason for existing. In *Exploding Love*, the men are henpecked, disgruntled and driven by their dicks, and the women are browbeating, scheming and undiscerning in their desire to get hitched. Director Watkins and his cast do their best to salvage this retrograde material, and a few glimmers of hope shine through in the performances; White and Simon both mine whatever subtlety exists in Coyne's lines, and their comic timing electrifies the stale air of this particular men's room.

Other than that – and it doesn't please me to have to say this – the whole thing should be flushed. – Rick Levin

Exploding Love plays through Feb. 12 at LCC's Blue Door Theatre; lanec.edu/perarts/

May I Have Some More?

The dirty streets of London crawl with vermin and their lousy human counterparts. Victorian England is a great place to get rich, a terrible place to be poor and the perfect place for Charles Dickens' imagination to run wild with an orphan in search of hope.

Oliver! The Musical is more than memorable songs like "Food, Glorious Food" and "Consider Yourself." It is a dark, Dickensian story. A successful production takes skill, bravery and a heap of children.

Fortunately, director Eynne Hollens brings chutzpa to the table along with her veteran abilities as an actor and singer – for instance, the chutzpa to direct a 60-person cast for her first real musical; to call up Richard Leebrick out of the blue and convince him to play the villainous Fagin; to move the production from Springfield's snug Wildish Theater to the big auditorium at Sheldon High School, because she knows she can fill the seats.

Just after the set was finished and before the costumes were passed out, I caught up with Hollens to get her take on directing a Dickens classic.

"I've loved every minute of it," she says. To be sure, Hollens is no stranger to Rose Children's Theatre; she recalls playing "the rear end of Daisy the tap-dancing cow," and taking a lead role in *The King and I*. Hollens has spent a lot of time on that stage.

"I wanted to direct *Oliver*," she says firmly. When the RCT board balked, she didn't back down. I asked about her passion for the show, and she explains that, along with a really great musical, "Dickens provides us with all these incredible characters."

"It's a really stellar cast," Hollens says of the kids and adults she's assembled for the production. Familiar local talents crowd the stage, including Erica Jean, Chaz King, Dance Theater of Oregon's Pamela and Marc Siegel as well as their daughter, 13-year-old Kyra, who's just returned from Broadway. The cast is composed predominantly of children, with the title role played by Evan Hopper-Moore.

Throw in costume design by the miracle-working Dody Hansen and set design by Skip Hubbard, and you have 50 budding young actors supported in their production by some wonderful adult help.

"This promises to be more than your typical children's theater," Hollens says. "It's going to be amazing." – Anna Grace

Oliver runs 7pm Friday & Saturday, Feb. 3-11 and 2pm Sunday, Feb. 5 & 12 at Sheldon High School Theater, 2455 Willakenzie Rd.; info at www.therct.com or 431-0444.

**Evan Hopper-Moore
in Rose Children's
Theater's *Oliver!*
The Musical**

