

# Where There's Smoke

Putting out the fire with kerosene in Leebrick's *Fahrenheit 451*

**F**irst published in 1953, *Fahrenheit 451* contains one of the great opening sentences in American literature: "It was a pleasure to burn." Adapted from author Ray Bradbury's own script and presented in collaboration with the Eugene Library's "Big Read" project, Lord Leebrick's production of *Fahrenheit 451* is an eye-opener, especially for those of us whose recall of the novel is a bit fuzzy. As director Bobby Vrtis indicates in his program notes, this is no simple screed against state censorship.

Granted, Bradbury's story contains the stock elements and narrative arc of classic dystopias, ranging from Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* to *Brave New World* and *1984*: a future society structured on totalitarian ideals of control, coercion and complacency, antithetical to all independence of thought, action and expression; an anti-hero (here, fireman Guy Montag, played with twitchy anxiety by Cameron Carlisle) haunted by thoughts that society is awry; a free-spirited woman (Arun Storrs' perky, peppy Clarisse) whose sexualized smarts catalyze Guy's nagging doubts into a dangerous act of rebellion; and a seductively paternal authority figure (fire chief Beatty, played with ominous aplomb by Stanley Coleman) who, deviously unloosing the screws of Guy's sanity, reveals just how deeply the fix is in.

To be sure, the firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* do torch books, but their acts of immolation are less punitive than sanitary; unlike George Orwell's vision of the future as a boot stamping on a human face forever, Bradbury imagined something more incremental and insidious, requiring of its citizen-victims not obedience but complicity. "How unreasonable people are!" Kierkegaard joked. "They have freedom of thought – they demand freedom of speech." It's so easy: flood the environment with endless and omnipresent doses of kaleidoscopic distractions, and the synapses begin to fry.

In Leebrick's highly stylized production, daily life in *Fahrenheit 451* looks suspiciously like right now: overstimulated by whiz-bang technology, mesmerized by personal electronic devices, guided by inanimate voices and driven to distraction by such interactive Warholian wowzers as when Guy's wife, Mildred (Kelsey McKean), inserts herself into her own TV talk show from the comfort of her living room. Those happy pills help, too – something to take the edge off, like Huxley's *soma*. The idea, as Chief Beatty declares, is to "not let any oxygen get to the mind." Information instead of comprehension, "non-combustible facts" that give a "sense of motion without moving."

Utilizing Steen V. Mitchell's surprisingly spare set – all open spaces and right angles, movable boxes and one huge projection screen – Vrtis makes something unnervingly beautiful of Bradbury's cautionary tale; the production is intricately layered and propelled by passages of dance, a kind of narcotic movement that relays the spiritual stupor of society's brain-squelch. The operatic opening scene archly sets the tone, and the transitions between abstract sequences to dialogue-driven action are, for the most part, seamless. Technology is used sparingly, but to strong effect. Tyranny echoes in the metallic flick of a Zippo lighter.

*Fahrenheit 451* is delicately choreographed, and the vital performances – especially those by Carlisle, Coleman and Stephen Speidel as the self-exiled intellectual Faber, who literally gets in Guy's ear – inject the material with an engagingly modern flair. If there is a drawback (a minor one), it's that the more abstract, experimental sequences, while flowing nicely, tend to sap a sense of urgency from the production – as though this particular dystopia needs a splash of kerosene, a gush of anger and desperation to set all that kindling ablaze.

Then again ... as Faber tells Guy, when societies permit a free flow of ideas and the time to pursue them, citizens also have "the right to carry out independent actions" based on what we've learned. "Remember," Faber warns, "the public stopped reading of its own accord." Perhaps the lack of urgency is our own emergency. – Rick Levin

*Fahrenheit 451* plays through March 24 at Lord Leebrick Theatre; lordleebrick.org or 465-1506



## A New Q

Masturbating puppets make beautiful music at ACE



**A** cozy set of run-down apartments hugs the stage, leaving less of a street and more of a sidewalk for the aggressive characters and busty puppets to (literally) spill into and ignite the audience during Actors Cabaret's angsty, irreverent production of *Avenue Q*. This "Sesame Street for adults" follows the post-collegiate lives of people, monsters and puppets as they struggle to make it on the confusing, real-life pavement of Avenue Q. If you're not an incurable prude/self-appointed PC officer and managed to miss the two other recent productions of this Broadway hit, you're in for a treat. Actors Cabaret is at no disadvantage staging what is the third local showing of *Q* in the past year, as fresh characterizations take the script for a new spin.

Take Alexis Myles' crowd-pleasing Gary Coleman, for instance. A little more sage and far more accessible than the tour's interpretation of her character, Myles imbues the song "Schadenfreude" with such hopeful passion you'll envy the hopelessly lost. Samantha Rose White creates a charming, raunchier Kate Monster. Tyler Holden made his aspiring (and failing) comedian Brian easy to laugh at. Strong, energetic performances emerge from the rest of the cast as well, crowding the stage in a carnal conglomeration of emotional puppets and persons.

ACE's *Avenue Q* increases the humanity of the musical to mostly good results. Projected images are replaced with real people, diminishing some of the production's *Sesame Street* appeal, though this won't be missed by those unfamiliar with the show. And the interplay between puppets and actors is less technical perfection and more fun.

"I would definitely see this show again," an audience member enthused at intermission. He's not alone. Like the script itself, this production of *Avenue Q* is no-holds-barred, in-your-face ACE entertainment. – Anna Grace

*Avenue Q* runs at Actors Cabaret of Eugene March 2-April 7; actorscabaret.org or 683-4368.

**COUPON**

**NOW 2 LOCATIONS! ★ SY'S NEW YORK PIZZA**

**55 SILVER LN. 654-0603**  
11AM-10PM DAILY

**1211 ALDER 686-9598**  
11AM-MIDNIGHT SUN-THU  
11AM-1AM FRI-SAT

COUPONS GOOD UNTIL MARCH 22ND, 2012

SERVING DELICIOUS NEW YORK PIZZA BY THE SLICE AND BY THE WHOLE PIZZA PIE

**\$2.00 OFF ANY 18" LARGE**

**FREE LARGE SODA W/ PURCHASE OF 2 SLICES**

**Sy's PIZZA**

**COUPON**

**Wellness Centered Dentistry**  
— Individual Care for Individual People —

*A Holistic Approach to — Dental Care —*

**541-868-2008**  
4725 Village Plaza Loop  
Ste 101 • Eugene, OR

**Rob Whicker DDS**

wcdentistry.com