

**Shamelessly Entertaining**

In an unsettling trend, Broadway has turned to Hollywood for inspiration. *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* is one of a string of hit films revamped with razzle-dazzle and shoved onto a stage. *Legally Blond* will run at Actors Cabaret of Eugene later this spring, and if you're in New York you can try to find a ticket for – yes, it's true – *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*.

It's an American trend that would be a lot easier to turn up my nose at if it wasn't so wonderfully entertaining.

Take the Very Little Theatre's current production of *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. I loved the 1988 film about two conmen who get mixed up with the wrong mark, so happily peopled by Michael Cane and Steve Martin. But I like the musical even better. Minor characters are fleshed out and mildly humorous scenes are given a shot of steroid-strong song and dance.

*Scoundrels* is very consciously a play, with spiraling self-references and open acknowledgement of the audience. Michael Walker's set works this shtick beautifully, operating like a Transformer, quickly and easily moving the imagination from a cliff top overlooking the French Riviera to a posh casino.

Director Chris Pinto sets loose on the stage a riot of local talent. Michael P. Watkins as the consummate playboy/conman Lawrence Jameson is pure casting genius. Tara Wilbrev is delightful as Christine Colgate the Soap Queen. Shannon Coltrane and an outrageous blond wig create a fearsome Jolene Oaks from Oklahoma, and Jennifer Sellers is a sketch as the ever-faithful "Lady Muriel" of Omaha.

But as good as these actors are, audiences may have some trouble noticing them; all eyes are on Tom Wilson, gleefully wrecking havoc as Freddy Benson. Seriously, this actor could be sentenced to hard time for stealing the show. He is funnier than Steve Martin.

The cast is supported by an extraordinarily strong chorus, which in turn is backed up by a first-rate band.

Seated beside my mother who shook with laughter throughout the show, I became convinced of the wisdom in converting a film to a musical. If you're looking to be entertained, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* is the best bet for your theater money. – *Anna Grace*

*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* runs through March 31 at the Very Little Theatre; info at [thevlt.com](http://thevlt.com) or 344-7751.

**In The Crucible of Mediocrity**

Inspired by director Elia Kazan's "naming names" before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952, Arthur Miller – the great used-car salesman of American authors – churned out *The Crucible*. The play, set during the '92 Salem witch trials (1692, that is), locates its lugubrious moral center in the character of John Proctor, a man of courageous rectitude who refuses to succumb to the orgy of persecution that is plunging his preachy peers into madness.

That Proctor's rectitude is the fly in the Puritanical ointment goes without saying. In fact, *The Crucible* itself goes without saying. The play is longwinded but short on sophistication and insight, and it transforms a rich, creepy and complexly psychosocial era of this country's Puritan past into an über-allegory of political paranoia that does little but pander to bumper-sticker bourgeois liberalism and the complacency it breeds. Quaint, incurious, stilted, self-congratulating, pinched, shallow and sexist, *The Crucible* is to the Red Scare what *Thelma & Louise* is to modern feminism: The triumphalist bullshit of shooting fish in a barrel.

Beyond these minor objections, however, there is little to fault in University Theatre's production of *The Crucible* now playing at UO's Hope Theatre. The play is ably directed by Theresa May, though I suspect her notion of "re-purposing" Miller's work as an "inoculation" against modern McCarthyism may explain the show's inexpedient running time; instead of recycling, the play deserves reducing. In fact, you could safely cut the thing in half and not lose a stitch in value. Rod Serling wrote a *Twilight Zone* episode, "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" – a Red Scare fable veiled as a sci-fi chiller – that accomplishes more in 30 minutes, and mo' better, than Miller achieves in three beleaguered hours.

With that said, University Theatre's production is quite impressive to behold, thanks in large part to Jerry Hooker's majestic set, the chiaroscuro atmospherics of Gran Geiger's lighting, and gorgeous period costumes by designer Gina Love. The large cast does its best with Miller's clunky, formalized dialogue, but you can almost feel the shiver of discomfort when the young actors have to crunch on lines like "There is a prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits" and "I give you my soul, leave me my name!" Mouthing such expulsive bombast, which just begs for Monty Python undermining, is a feat unto itself.

If you crane your neck skyward and watch carefully during the stroboscopic opening of the first act, you will catch a brief glimpse of authentic dancing-around nakedness that, personally, I rather appreciated (thanks be to Satan, of course). There isn't enough nudity on Eugene stages. And, beyond all expectations, a few of the actors not only survive Miller's muddle-fuddle but distinguish themselves in roles cut from the whole cloth of moral caricature. Kylie DeHaven wonderfully ekes out the bitch in Abigail Williams, the manipulative ringleader of witchy mass hysteria. Naomi Wright brings a humanizing humor to the character of Tituba, and Andrew Poletto (Reverend Parris), Riley Shanahan (John Proctor) and Maddie Downes, as Rebecca Nurse, are all solid.

In one of Miller's better lines, the Reverend Hale proclaims, "The devil can never overcome a minister." Likewise, a good cast can never overcome a mediocre writer, all of whom, of course, are created equal – some writers are just more equal than others. – *Rick Levin*

*The Crucible* runs through March 17 at UO's Hope Theatre; info at <http://pages.uoregon.edu/theatre/>



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