

Uncle Tom's Truth

Slaves take back history in UO's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*

"You can't change history!" cries abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe. And with a quick, knowing smile, Tom replies: "No, but you can change who writes it."

This is the crux of University Theatre's uproarious production of Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*. The play's characters, culled from the sometimes-celebrated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, proceed to call out Stowe for the enduring, damaging stereotypes she helped create. Determined to rewrite their own stories in the wake of the Rodney King beating, they use dance, rap, gospel and black power to upend the traditional narrative of slavery.

Alexander's play makes use of everything from melodrama to Mr. T references in an attempt to inspire the audience to think, cringe and laugh. The script is funny, though it doesn't pull any punches when it comes to the atrocities of the antebellum South. Segments of *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* are difficult to watch, and theater traditionalists may not appreciate the production's erratic, edgy circus of thought and emotion. But if the truth is messy, it's still worth hearing.

Not satisfied to simply run away, George Harris (Nathan Urbach) returns with a black beret and a gun to take into his own hands the injustices of slavery. Naomi Wright's Eliza, empowered by the magnitude of her own epic drama, would prefer that her husband drop the gun, come home and stop trying to hone in on her scenes. As little Eva St. Claire, Sarah Ruggles approaches caricature

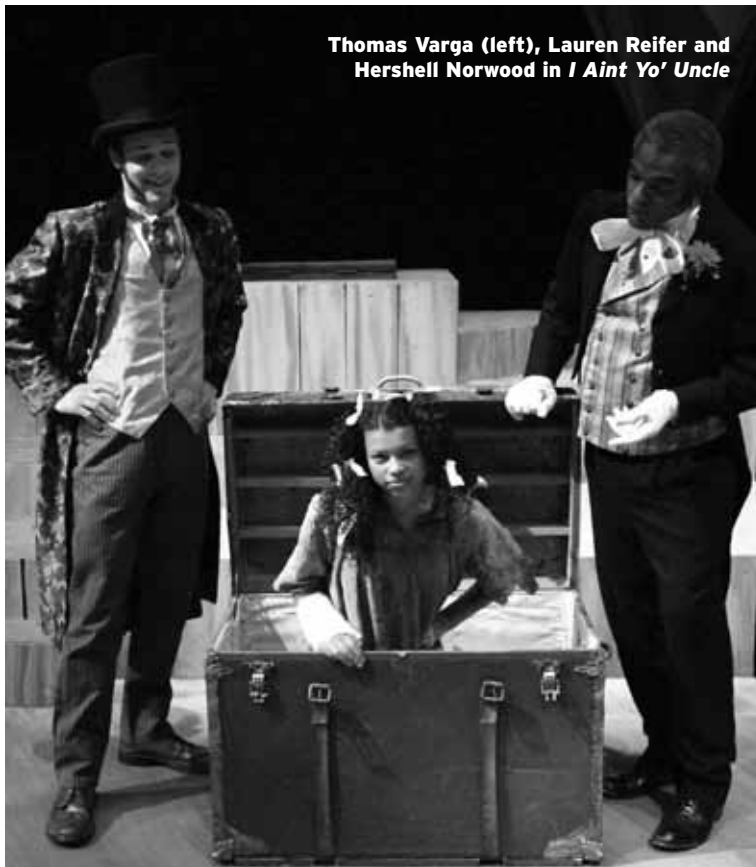
with deep earnestness, right down to her smile and stilted "doll walk." And Tom (Hershell Norwood) maintains an abiding sense of responsibility toward Stowe's original novel, adding introspection and complexity.

Dramaturge Rachel Foran's well-written notes suggest that Stowe was less responsible for the harmful racial stereotypes than were the unauthorized Tom Shows, in which Uncle Tom became an "Uncle Tom"; based loosely on the novel, these wildly popular touring productions glossed over the evils of slavery in favor of spotlighting the goofy antics of Tom and Topsy.

Now Topsy's back, and she's not happy.

Emerging with utmost relevance for today's society, Topsy (Lauren Reifer) remains stubbornly unrepentant. Depicted as a mischievous imp without parents or Christian faith, she embodies Stowe's criticism of the corrupt system of slavery and what it produced. In *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, Topsy moves seamlessly into the 21st century wearing a Nicki Minaj wig, ending the play on an unapologetic note, full of anger and energy.

LaDonna L. Forsgren's direction is similarly unapologetic. Forsgren uses the genre of melodrama to mock itself, mingling humor with rape and murder, and ultimately creating an evening as entertaining as it is thought provoking. — Anna Grace



Thomas Varga (left), Lauren Reifer and Hershell Norwood in *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*

PHOTO BY ARIEL OGDEN

I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist *Uncle Tom's Cabin* runs through June 2 at the UO's Hope Theatre; a "talkback" with playwright Robert Alexander will follow the Thursday, May 31, performance; ticket@uoregon.edu or 346-4363.

Lucky in Love

Odd couples find romance in *Almost, Maine*

Like the films of Christopher Guest (especially *Waiting for Guffman*) and the Prairie Home broadcasts of Garrison Keillor, John Cariani's *Almost, Maine* — now at the Very Little Theatre — sports a veneer of pleasantly skewed gentility. The play's sentimental surfaces appear ready-made for the fuzzy liberalism that hums like a bumble across the honeyed airwaves of NPR. If, however, Cariani's romantic comedy proves affable and easy on the senses, it would be a mistake to dismiss it as just another brindled, birchy bit of geriatric self-congratulations. As the kids say on Facebook: It's complicated.

Directed by VLT vet Michael P. Watkins, *Almost, Maine* indeed goes down easy. The play is broken up into a series of interconnected skits, each one as punchy and self-contained

as a short story. Set in a rural hamlet that looks a lot like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* ("We never got around to getting organized," one townie explains, "so we're just Almost"), most of the scenes involve a moment of unexpected poignancy between two sharply sketched characters. In *Almost*, love is in the air.

In one bit, a woman mourning her divorce is suddenly kissed by the stranger upon whose property she wants to pitch a tent; in another passage, a pair of co-workers — a man and a virginal tomboy — do an awkward waltz around their unexplored mutual attraction; and in perhaps the play's finest moment, a couple of blue-collar dudes complaining about their luck with women slowly realize they are falling, literally, in love.

Almost, Maine transcends the treacly stuff of rom-com cliché by skipping the foreplay (attraction, obstacle, interruption, rekindling, consummation) and cutting right to the chase: the irrational romp of desire. Each successive vignette, like a flight of fancy, builds on the optimistic idea of the soul mate — the faith that, given enough time and patience, each of us eventually will encounter her/his perfect

match. The larkish comedy in Cariani's conceit derives from the fact that we might not immediately recognize that perfect match when it arrives, or it might have been right in front of our face all along.

David Sherman's nicely uncomplicated set (a bench, a porch, a fence) is full of wide-open spaces, and Watkins' direction uses the big stage to good effect: The paired players interact with the vastness in such a way that they are by turns diminished or magnified, according to the mood and rhythms of the action (for instance, a lonely guy sitting on a bench contemplating a snowball looks to be swallowed by the universe itself). And Watkins has assembled an attractive cast of comic actors that includes Cody Mendonca, Sean Dugan, Sophie Schmidt, Holly Stanley, Joseph Tanner Paul, Sarah Etherton and Jay Hash; they provide just the right amount of sweetness and spark to fill this modest but wise play with light. *Almost, Maine* isn't looking to change the world, just to remind us what makes the world go 'round.

— Rick Levin

Almost, Maine plays through June 9 at the Very Little Theatre; TheVLT.com or 344-7751.

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