



PHOINIX PLAYERS ON THE SET OF SILVER SPUR SALOON

THE HARDEST WORKING TROUPE IN EUGENE

PHOINIX PLAYERS RISE AGAIN IN RED CANE THEATRE

BY RICK LEVIN

It's hot, humid and breezeless inside the Red Cane Theatre, a new Eugene venue sinking fresh roots at West 11th and Chambers. Right next door is Lava Lounge, the bamboo-and-thatch watering hole sprung like a tropical oasis within Ring of Fire Thai restaurant. It's late afternoon, in an uncommonly flowery month of May, and from the adjacent lounge one of those tall, fruity drinks with a baby umbrella is calling.

Inside the Red Cane, however, the call for happy hour goes unanswered. Opening night approaches. They want those roots sunk deep.

On black wooden risers serving as a makeshift stage, the Phoinix Players run through scene after scene in the sweltering shell of the new theater, which remains a work in progress. The members of this troupe, ranging in age from 18 to 24, have spent long hours stripping the floor of this former Asian market, scraping up years of goo like barnacles from a ship's hull; they've scrubbed the high ceiling, painted the tall walls. It's tedious work, blister making and back aching, and a far cry from the feather boas and suede shuffle of their upcoming Broadway musical, scheduled to open, if everything falls into place, June 28.

For educator and local theater maven Mary Huls, who founded Phoinix Players some eight years back, work is work — perspiration and inspiration are inseparable, and when it comes to the hard knocks of musical theater, it's in for a penny, in for a pound. Whether blocking out scenes or knocking out walls, Huls' young actors are bound to her vision through determination and drive. There is no room for divas in Huls' creative universe. If you're too good to scour the toilet, buddy, the southbound Greyhound leaves thrice a day for L.A.

As a self-funding troupe of nomadic actors, the Phoinix Players aren't unfamiliar with busting ass, and not only to get a production up and running. With Huls at the helm, the

troupe has taken its show abroad several times, performing in Los Angeles, New York, London and the Czech Republic, where their one scheduled show turned into an additional 10 performances at the demand of their hosts.

Several of the players teach workshops and classes, and it seems everyone in the cast pulls some form of double duty; for instance, Elise Newell choreographs shows, and Daniel Halstead oversees safety.

For sure, every skill set among the cast members — as well as that of Huls' husband Gary, who volunteers his construction skills — has been tapped to make Red Cane a reality. "The theater is not going to look like it does unless someone does it," jokes actor Richie Deyhle, to which his co-star Elise Newell adds bluntly: "Stuff's gotta get done."

TELLING STORIES

As it was for Joan Didion, so it is for Phoinix Players founder Mary Huls: In life, it's all about the stories we tell. Not any single story — though we all have our preferences, from *Don Quixote* and *Law & Order* to *The Gospels* and *Porgy & Bess* — but those journeys into the adventure of experience in the realm of discovery on the verge of revelation. As in, you are really just a story told to me, and vice versa. When we take those stories to the stage, they become like a ritual, a public celebration of community. For Huls, then, story and community are just two sides of this life's strange coin.

"Passionately, I believe story is the single most important thing for human beings to share," she tells me. "To tell stories, with characters, with movement, with song and heart, is a privilege. We know it reaches out to the core of people, and we want that to be our mission — to reach the community with stories that inspire, that transform and simply entertain them."

A few weeks back I was sitting next to Huls, watching a full-cast run-through of the honky-tonk torch song "Any

Man of Mine," when suddenly something about the size of a grasshopper went flying from the stage; the airborne object took one long, loopy arc and then landed, skidding, at my feet. I picked it up and looked over at Huls. "Bobby pin?" she whispered. I nodded. "Yeah," she said, "that's Amanda. Happens all the time."

It's somehow fitting that bobby pins regularly catapult from the head of Amanda Lawrence. When, last July, I attended my first Phoinix Players production, *Crazy for You*, way out at Junction City's Star Theater, it was Lawrence who really caught my eye; even among an exuberant, engaging cast possessing equal amounts of courage, talent, grit and sheer faith, Lawrence, at just 19, stood out as impressively gifted for her years. She revealed the beauty, dazzle and mad comic timing of Golden Era legends like Jean Arthur and Irene Dunne. Lawrence had it — the It Factor, that certain intangible aura of unlimited artistic possibilities.

Sharing the lead with Amanda Lawrence in *Crazy for You* was Austin Lawrence, 19, a multifaceted performer with confidence and charisma to spare. As they navigated the romantic rollercoaster of Gershwin's madcap comedy, Austin and Amanda created a flirty, charming rapport that gave the show a sweetly lilting feel of youthful infatuation. In other words, they had chemistry.

Life, as everyone knows, imitates art. Austin and Amanda (*nee* Bauer) recently tied the knot. It's just too perfect: When, in a matter of days, the Red Cane Theatre throws open its doors to Eugene, the newlyweds will retake the stage, this time as a wooing, sparring pair of spur-crossed lovers. You can't make this stuff up.

What you can make up — and what Huls has made up in her new musical *Silver Spur Saloon*, as a nod to the Phoinix Players' homecoming and debut Eugene performance — is an old-fashioned Broadway musical