

Shadow Dancing in Pleasant Hill

Eugene playwright says get on the bus



First impression tells you that Eugene-based playwright Cassi Holmes was once that quiet girl in a summer dress who regularly had her pigtailed pulled by mean boys during recess. Holmes exudes a sort of bemused thoughtfulness, and her blue eyes sparkle with the punch line to a joke she has yet to formulate. Her manner is halting but generous, and she is quick to bite off a sentence if she thinks you have something to say.

The plays Holmes writes seem to belie her innocent mien: They are wicked nasty, full of blood and sweat and beer, and they map a surreal landscape ruled by twisted Jesus freaks, heavy metal messiahs and defiant belles with clipped wings. Music takes on a significance of near-religious grandeur, capable of conjuring moments of sentiment so strong they travel time and space.

In Holmes' most recent work, *Shadow Dancing*, which opens Friday, June 22, the music of Andy Gibb, Ozzie Osbourne and Queen creates a psycho-emotional world in which roller skating is a transcendental act, and where blood and butterflies coningle to the strains of "Highway to Hell."

"It's where I come from," Holmes says of the disturbingly intimate imagery in *Shadow Dancing*, which is by turns brief and brutal, sweet and sick, like Sylvia Plath huffing nitrous oxide. "It's the only thing I can write, really. It's just kind of a twisted, jacked-up version of what I've been through."

There are no half-measures in Holmes' artistic universe. Her previous play, the grotesquely brilliant *Cowboy Mouth*, was staged in an artist's warehouse and then, for its closing night, before a standing-room-only crowd at Wandering Goat during the 2010 Whiteaker Block Party.

This time around, Holmes is asking folks to hop on a bus for a ride to Pleasant Hill, where a semi trailer parked near an old saw mill has been converted into an outdoor stage. Once again, she has cast her play with friends and confidants, none of them professional actors, whose quirky antics somehow elevate the eerie, apocalyptic tenor of *Shadow Dancing*.

Neither is Holmes a pedigreed author, though she's paid her dues in her own fashion, having studied theater arts both at

Lane Community College and University of Oregon. "I literally walked out in the middle of some dumb monologue," she says of her aborted career in academia. "I said, 'Fuck this,' and I never went back. Half of those years I was just all over the place and botching it up."

After a long hiatus, Holmes again picked up the pen, but nothing was clicking at first. "I couldn't do it," she recalls. "I would try. I would hack away at this old typewriter. And then everything just started kind of coming to me in the last couple of years."

Holmes credits the support and aid of friends for again opening up her creative pathways, and she especially praises the local amateur actors who make up the cast of *Shadow Dancing*: Aaron Sullivan, Gridlock, Lindsay Lepon, Amber Taylor, Daniel Williams and Julia Holtzman, who also lent her frenetic chops and physical charisma to *Cowboy Mouth*.

Then, there, are the unhinged elements that make up *Shadow Dancing*, an exemplar of underground art. Hey, it's not for nothing they call it a "theater of battle." The wily, elastic tactics of guerilla warfare trump the rigid rules of conventional engagement, damn near every time. Holmes is proving that guerilla theater can be just as crafty and effective, and with less collateral damage.

By adopting the scrappy, DIY aesthetics of punk rock, Holmes and her troupe are thriving off the radar, tapping into undiscovered reserves of native talent and can-do; they'll stage these homegrown plays for anyone willing to forego the pampering of white wine and seat cushions. The upshot of bypassing the establishment route is artistic freedom and creative control.

Holmes says she's hoping people will have a visceral response to *Shadow Dancing*. "I just want them to be kind of in this grip that they can't get out of, whether they enjoy it or absolutely hate it," she says. "And because of that, it'll be memorable."

EW

Get on the bus: *Shadow Dancing* plays 9pm Friday & Saturday, June 22-23 & June 29-30; on show nights, a bus will pick people up 8pm at Blair Alley Arcade, 245 Blair, and folks who want to drive should meet at 8:20pm at Gatehouse Pizza, 35855 Plaza Loop Rd., Pleasant Hill, to carpool to the site; for further info, visit shadowdancingtheplay.blogspot.com or call 743-3141; \$10 sug. don., nobody turned away.