



Assisted Lifting

Crime pays for the old folks in *Breath of Spring*

On March 4, 1513, the Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon, on a valedictory commission from King Ferdinand, set out from Puerto Rico to find the rumored “Islands of Benimy.” He found Florida instead. It was only posthumously that writers began mythologizing de Leon’s voyage as a search for the mythical Fountain of Youth. What he was really searching for was gold, slaves and other imperial booty.

Nonetheless, old people continue to flock to Florida, where they pluck up condo shares, swill gin fizzes, pop Viagra and, just like everybody else, shrivel up and die under the melanomic sun. Time remains unvanquished, and there are no quick fixes to aging. Unless you happen to find magic

alien eggs incubating in your swimming pool — like those lucky fogies in Ron Howard’s 1985 quasi-religious movie *Cocoon* — the only remedy for the ravages of old age is spirit, self-care and the spry inspirations available to a mind kept open to surprises.

Speaking of old, Eugene’s Very Little Theatre is completing its 84th season, now making it the longest continuously running community theater in the nation. As befits its octogenarian status, VLT has mounted a near-immaculate production of Peter Coke’s 1958 play *Breath of Spring*, a comic romp about five British pensioners who are unexpectedly revitalized when they happen into a life of crime.

Helmed by first-time director Nancy Boyett and peopled by a swell cast of

veteran actors, *Breath of Spring* is exactly that: a fresh, bracing breeze of boisterous comedy that winks at you with sly intelligence and wicked complicity.

When Lily (Erica DeJong), maid to Dame Beatrice (Sharon Sless), hands her employer a fur, Beatrice pries it out of her that the gift was stolen; Beatrice demands it be returned. But Lily, it turns out, once served a sentence for theft, and if she gets caught fur in hand, it’s back to the hoosegow. Beatrice hatches a plan: Enlisting the aid of her boarders, they will return the fur to its rightful owner.

Enter the crew: Brigadier Albert Rayne, Ret. (David Kessler) who, tapping his past military expertise, devises a complicated scheme for returning the fur. At once pompous, distracted and oddly charming, the Brigadier takes charge of this ragtag group of seniors, which also includes the svelte, saucy Lady Alice (Tere Tronson); Nan (Susan Keller), a prim, fastidious music teacher; and the nervous, neurotic Hattie (Chris Hugo), whose penchant for panic threatens to derail the caper.

The group succeeds in returning the fur. All is well, and Lily is safe. But, as their collective adrenals begin to wane, this wizened wild bunch realizes they’ve now acquired quite a taste for criminal enterprise. Breaking the law, they discover, restores their youthful vigor and zip. It’s a pip. Stealing things also brings the Brigadier’s britches back to half-mast, causing Alice and the Dame to vie like peacocks for his erotic attentions. Like some geriatric

James Gang, this senior sextet — plotting ever more risky, complicated and thereby satisfying heists — believes itself to be bucking the system by fencing its booty and distributing the cash in anonymous brown parcels posted to the needy.

Being a screwball comedy of the late Golden Era, *Breath of Spring* is quick to throw a wrench in the works, as Lily — wise to the pitfalls of pinching furs — discovers her employer’s double life and demands that her crew stop before getting popped. This isn’t so easy, of course, especially when lifting furs provides a shot of oxygen to the anaerobic sterility of enforced old age.

Everything about *Breath of Spring* works. From Richard Sheeland and Vern Haffner’s bright, elegantly bourgeois set design and dressing, to the precise costumes of Gail Rapp and her crew, to the smooth interplay of director and cast, this production sails along fleet and yar, a thing of beauty. Like the finest of madcap comedies, the play is so diverting — time just flies — that its billowy philosophical content caresses like a warm wind. Only after the final curtain do you get the gist of this play’s message: Heaven is on earth, forever is now, and the only Fountain of Youth is the life you have.

It’s been a very good year for theater in Eugene, and *Breath of Spring* might just be the capper.

EW

Breath of Spring plays through Aug. 11 at the Very Little Theatre, 2350 Hilyard St.; info & tickets at TheVLT.com or 344-7751.

Cinderella In a Size 10 Slipper

For everyone who has ever wished that Cinderella would just pull herself up out of the ashes and tell her wicked stepsisters to go buckle their own bustles, Edith Weiss has written a charming makeover of the classic Grimm fairytale.

In Weiss’ version, *Cinderella! Cinderella!*, the problem isn’t her evil adoptive family; it’s that she can’t muster the strength to defy their ridiculous orders. Plain and large-footed, Cinderella is nice to everyone, including her tormenting stepsisters. With just the right amount of magic, her vision-impaired fairy godmother (Martin Diaz-Valdes) helps Cinderella find the courage to stand up for what’s right.

Director Michelle Yeadon inspires her cast to completely buy into the story and the lessons it teaches. They enter singing the Beach Boys’ classic “God Only Knows” and proceed to delight in the performance and their young audience members.

John Jeffrey plays a down-to-earth Prince and Shannon McNally is gratifyingly awkward as Cinderella. Antonia Gomez and a monstrous puppet are the fierce stepsisters, swallowing every one of society’s worst stereotypes for women.

My guest reviewers Owen, 9, and Margaret, 7, loved this play. Owen particularly enjoyed Cameron Walker’s quirky town crier, but with fun historical references and humor ranging from a cat in drag to misused French, there are laughs for everyone. Bring a blanket, snacks and your favorite kiddos and enjoy a new take on an old tale. — *Anna Grace*

Cinderella! Cinderella! runs through Aug. 11 and Aug. 7-11, with performances at 11 am in Amazon Park; tickets are \$5 and can be purchased from the box office starting at 10:30 a.m. on the day of each performance, children under 3 free.

Mad Duckling Theatre at it again with *Cinderella! Cinderella!*



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