



# SINISTER SPINSTER SISTERS

VLT revisits the black comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace*

**W**hen Joseph Kesserling sat down to write *Arsenic and Old Lace* — about a pair of spinster sisters who act as angels of mercy to lonely old pensioners, and the nephew who struggles to put a cork in his murderous aunties’ decanter of toxic elderberry wine — the American playwright believed he was cooking up a mean, disturbing drama about the banality of evil.

The play that hit the stage in 1931, however, had twisted itself into a wicked knot of gallows humor, and audiences loved it. By the time of Frank Capra’s 1944 film adaptation, the die had been cast: For many, *Arsenic and Old Lace* is the sine qua non of modern dark comedy, equal parts nasty, bumptious and wry.

Very Little Theatre’s staging of *A&OL*, directed by Sarah Etherton, is a faithful rendition of Kesserling’s most beloved play, solidly composed if a bit unadventurous and long-winded. After a few opening night snags in the way of vocal volume and flubbed lines, the production relaxed into a kind of loping familiarity, as though banking on the elderly audience’s collective taste for nostalgia.

Because the action of the play takes place exclusively in the boarding house of the devious Brewster sisters, Abby and Martha (Chris Hugo and Jennifer Sellers, respectively, both excellent), the atmospherics on stage are important, and Michael Walker’s set design is carefully construed to evoke the musty comforts of dowager living, though sometimes the stage’s spacious furnishing works against it; things aren’t sufficiently cluttered and

claustrophobic-feeling to create the mausoleum creepiness that gives the play its zing.

That said, Etherton has done a top-notch casting job, and the actors’ comic acumen elevates this *A&OL* above mere sentimentality and camp. Along with Hugo and Sellers — both of whom adeptly eke out the sinister/sweet paradox that makes their characters’ murdering ways so weirdly charming — there is Chris Hugo in the key role of Mortimer; as the nephew who must quietly thwart his aunts’ “bad habit,” Hugo finds a nice balance between bemused bumbling and charismatic can-do.

Also noteworthy are the always-strong Michael P. Watkins as the drunken Dr. Einstein, Christina Jamerson as Elaine Harper and Michael Walker, whose baritone voice and seedy leers turn the murderous Jonathan Brewster into an icon of lurking comic malignancy.

But VLT, and most of the rest of Eugene’s dramatic venues, continues to ignore a problem that eventually will decimate what’s left of our local theater scene. The problem is this: In their effort to maintain a faithful, paying audience by regularly mounting safe, sure-fire productions (a kind of “First, do no harm” approach), local theaters are failing to renew their audience base. Now, I like old people; I’m damn near AARP-worthy myself. But at *A&OL* I would say the mean audience age was 70.

VLT, the longest standing community theater in the country, is obviously doing a lot of things right, but it’s not doing enough to get young people in the seats. Why not mount some riskier stuff once in a while, like Adam Rapp (the American playwright who wrote *Red Light Winter*)? By not challenging audiences at the level of art, Eugene theaters are underestimating the audiences they now have, and ignoring all those untapped fans out there who might thrill to see something written in the last, say, 30 years. ■

*Arsenic and Old Lace* plays through Oct. 27 at Very Little Theatre; \$12-\$17.

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