

A QUANTUM ROMP FOR THE AGES

University Theatre taps into Tom Stoppard's witty delights with *Arcadia*

Czech-born playwright Tom Stoppard was knighted as a British subject in 1997, a gesture of literary pomp that, while entirely deserved, nonetheless must have struck Sir Tom as a delicious twist of irony. As the author of such wickedly intelligent plays as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Arcadia*, as well as a co-writer of the screenplay for Terry Gilliam's dystopic masterpiece *Brazil*, Stoppard has made a name for himself as an uber-smart iconoclast of insanely inventive plays whose myopic, narcissistic characters are often steamrolled by the big ideas with which they grapple. The only thing grander than Stoppard's empathy is his lack of romantic attachment to human folly.

And thanks in part to this broadly arching and distinctly unsentimental approach (which he shares with such masters as Swift and Rabelais), Stoppard is capable in his plays of spanning genres and collapsing them at the same moment. For instance, in *Arcadia* — currently in production at University Theatre under the direction of Scott Kaiser — the playwright moves easily between high-minded banter and bawdy balderdash, while also hitting major sevenths of romance and strumming minor keys of pathos and tragedy. *Arcadia*, like Stoppard himself, is unclassifiable, and brilliant.

A quantum romp full of mysterious shallows and

KIRA HALL, RACHEL FAUGHT, ANDREW NGUYEN AND THOMAS VARGA IN *ARCADIA*



depths (or, better yet, a tongue-in-cheek investigation of art, ideas, life and death), *Arcadia* is set at Sidley Park estate in Derbyshire, England, and jumps back and forth in time, between the years 1809 and the present day. In the past, which comes to seem not so distant, Thomasina Coverly (Rachel Faught) is a teenage student grappling with Newtonian determinism, while her foppish tutor, Septimus Hodge (Thomas Varga), seeks to guide the wild orbit of her curiosity (which is as sexual as it is intellectual). From here the play regularly fast-forwards into the mid-1990s, where author Hannah Jarvis (Savannah Edson) and academic snob Bernard Nightingale (Nico Hewitt) engage in a literary tête-à-tête over the legacy of Sidley Park, which may involve the amorous exploits of Lord Byron and the strange appearance of a crazy hermit.

Ideas are Stoppard's stock-in-trade, and certainly *Arcadia* is a heady affair, though not nearly so intimidating as it might sound. For all the witticism and head-tripping

of the script, it is a deeply humane play; Stoppard lovingly razzes the intellectual vanity and romantic bombast of his characters, and the humor he ekes out of our all-too-human errors is less scathing than touching, sad and funny.

Kaiser's direction is sharp and confident and straightforward, which is exactly the right way to handle Stoppard's lofty explorations. John Elliott's set is gorgeously appointed, and costume shop manager Vicki Vanecek-Young does a bang-up job handling the fashions of two distinct eras.

What really makes UT's *Arcadia* work is the cast. As with any Stoppard work, *Arcadia* is an exercise in combative wordplay and linguistic tomfoolery, and here the actors find a nice balance between the importance of being earnest and the supple delights of Stoppard's more playful side. The result is a production that inspires laughter and thought in equal measure. *Arcadia* is a joke whose punch line is bittersweet. — Rick Levin

ZEN ROMANCE

OCT contemplates love with *Who Am I This Time?*

At the North Crawford Mask & Wig Club, Central Connecticut's finest community theater, Tom Newton is waxing philosophical on love, pure and complicated.

"The way I see it," he notes, "love and theater have a lot in common. They're both seductive. They both make promises they can't always keep. And they're both chock-full of attractive people who are maybe just a little too addicted to drama."

Adapted from Kurt Vonnegut by Aaron Posner, *Who Am I This Time?* weaves together three early pieces by Vonnegut (*Long Walk to Forever*, *Who Am I This Time?* and *Go Back to Your Precious Wife and Son*) all on the theme of love. Posner has set them on the stage of an amateur playhouse, intertwining theater and romance in ordinary and unlikely ways.

This is not the Kurt Vonnegut you read in high school. Devoid of alien hallucinations and post-war atrocities, these stories are super sweet. Set in 1962, it really feels like 1962, a time when it could be considered a good thing to follow your heart, the right thing to take your husband back, a time when it was possible for a man to support a family installing storm windows.

The play is decidedly mild for Oregon Contemporary Theater. In that space one expects to be shocked or challenged, but not necessarily charmed. It is an unexpected and delightful way to spend an evening.

This is not to say the play lacks meaning. The "just folks" characters explore and experience love in ways that are at once real and impossible.

At its heart, this is Tom's story, as he comes to understand his own marriage of 20 years through the



BILL HULINGS AND STORM KENNEDY

passionate promise of those around him. Actor Bill Hulings is a good choice for Tom. Able and likeable, he is as sincere a narrator as you're likely to find. Storm Kennedy is another snug fit as his wife Kate, cheerful or elegantly disdainful, she brings the emotion the moment calls for.

Brian Haimbach's direction is clear and uncomplicated. He allows room for Pamela Lehan-Siegel to have a high time in each of her fabulous characters, be it clipped directress or fading Hollywood bombshell. Haimbach's hand is also clear as Russell Dyball neatly balances each of the roles he takes on, one a bit of a caricature, the other requiring the building of a complex character — he is completely believable.

The unexpected left hook came from Steve Coatsworth as the uncomfortable Harry Nash. North Crawford's

greatest theatrical talent, Nash is able to understand any character, but unable to find himself. Watching Coatsworth flip from awkward stockroom boy to Stanley Kowalski is a pleasure. He pulls it off without hamming it up.

Audience reaction was strong and positive. The structure of the play and the down-to-earth sweetness of the characters encourage applause, and even the occasional bit of talk back. It all just feels so nice, we want to join in the action.

"And so it goes ..." they sing as the lights dim on their tales of love, echoing the Zen theme of *Slaughterhouse Five* with one of their own, shepherding us to the conclusion that love is not always what you want, love is not always what you expect, but love always is. — Anna Grace

Who Am I This Time? (and *Other Conundrums of Love*) runs Nov. 8-30 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre.