

ALEXIS MYLES, KIRSTIN NUSSER
AND TROY PENNINGTON

COME SAIL AWAY

ACE gets sunny with *Once on This Island*

More so than any other theater company in town, Actors Cabaret of Eugene continues to reflect the spirit and ethos of Eugene. Led by artistic director Joe Zingo and executive director/producer Joe Roberts — and with help from the indomitable Mark Van Beever, whose music direction is always top tier — ACE channels the best of our local culture by remaining free-spirited and at the same time hewing close to a tradition that is equal parts frontier strong and renegade D.I.Y. They are not afraid of taking risks at ACE — whether than means mounting work that is sexually or politically edgy (*Spring Awakenings*, *Hair*) or taking hold of a classic and making it distinctly and tastefully their own (*Les Misérables*). This is the little theater that could, and consistently does.

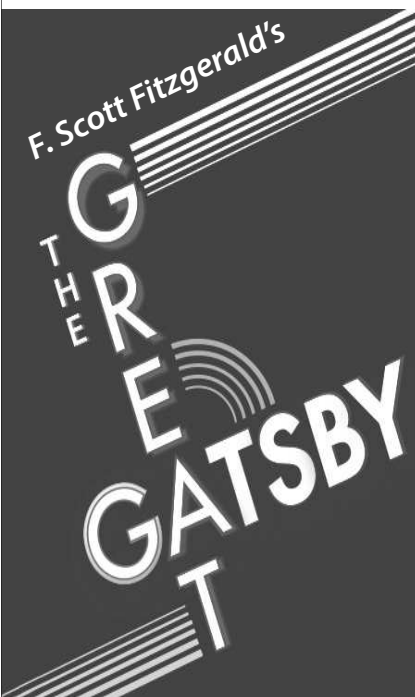
ACE's new show, *Once on This Island*, directed by Colleen Darnall Dietz, is neither particularly risky nor overly canonical, but it nonetheless sails right into the company's creative wheelhouse. It's an audience pleaser, plain and simple. A jubilant, humid tale of star-crossed lovers set in the Caribbean, *Once on This Island* is a one-act reimagining of the *Romeo & Juliet* story, full of colonial class-consciousness and shot through with an unrestrained sense of tropical romance. The show is frolicsome without being entirely frivolous.

Actor Alexis Miles, who was so good in ACE's recent production of *Hair*, takes the lead here, playing the role of love-struck peasant girl Ti Moune. With her lanky yet graceful frame and rich voice, Miles owns the stage; her performance captures the combination of bewilderment and tenacity that makes Ti Moune such an irresistible character, a stubborn waif undeterred in her quest for love. She is the anchor in the occasionally stormy seas that toss this simple tale to and fro on its way to the ultimate redemption.

Miles is surrounded by a cast — including Kirstin Nusser as Mama Euralie, Troy Pennington as Tonton Julian and Jacob Thiessen as taboo love interest Daniel — that puts its collective heart into evoking an island vibe, breezy and animate. If the soul of *Once on This Island* seems, at times, a bit Disney-fied in its faux-ethnographic nativism, it yet maintains a charming fidelity to its tenacious spirit of upward mobility for the underdog; theater, after all, has never been in the business of socio-economic realism. The musical numbers are wonderful, especially the catchy ensemble pieces, and Dietz's fluid choreography is always engaging. This is a great show for the kids, as well as adults willing to indulge the childlike wonder of a good fairy tale well played. ■

Once on This Island runs through April 12 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; \$16-\$42.95.

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