

THE POWERFUL PLAY GOES ON

OCT's Craig Willis scores another hit with *I and You*

As perhaps Eugene's foremost purveyor of new theatrical works, artistic director Craig Willis at Oregon Contemporary Theatre (OCT) is a tireless advocate of the hidden gem, the offbeat barnburner, the unfamiliar fandango. For Willis, the hunt is always on. He spends many a weekend traveling hither and yon along the coast — to Portland, to Seattle — attending table reads and walk-throughs of new plays, all in dogged pursuit of something fresh and lively for audiences here in town.

Thanks to the efforts of folks like Willis, who are willing to risk setting aside the umpteenth mounting of Ibsen to give us a gander at what's behind the curtain of contemporary drama, live theater remains a vital art form. It's an act of faith that translates into integrity and authenticity, which is the soul of good art.

Nobody's perfect, of course, but the string of successes that Willis and OCT have enjoyed of late creates a kind of happy and heady momentum, wrapping each successive show in an aura of excitement and anticipation. What will they do next?

This anticipation has less to do with scoring a "hit" than with merely experiencing the spectacle of a theater operating in a self-created environment of confidence and aplomb, where the bottom line is quality. In short, it's called hitting your stride.



JONATHAN THOMPSON AND LIV BURNS IN OCT'S *I AND YOU*

The less I say about OCT's latest production, the better. Directed by Willis himself, Lauren Gunderson's *I and You* is, on its surface, an intimate set piece about two high school students who spend one long night collaborating on a school project about Walt Whitman's epic poem *Leaves of Grass*. Caroline (Liv Burns), a snarky, smart, housebound teenager awaiting a liver transplant, finds the sanctuary of her bedroom suddenly violated by the unexpected arrival of Anthony (Jonathan Thompson), a black student "sent" by their teacher to engage her in poetic contemplations.

Hemmed in by the four walls of a sick teenage girl's bedroom, what develops between Caroline and Anthony

— combative and tentative at first, then with increasing revelation — becomes a cosmic drama of life and death, as Whitman's poetry inspires these two shy, scared, curious kids into an intimate back-and-forth about their deepest fears and greatest hopes. The chemistry between Burns and Thompson is undeniable, and it leads to a moment of reckoning that, beyond all interpretation, is exquisitely cathartic, shattering — a moment that sounded, sitting in the audience, like a roomful of people getting punched in the guts.

And that is what live theater is all about: getting rocked, and being grateful for the opportunity. ■

I and You plays through Nov. 15 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$35.



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