

ANNA PARKS (LEFT)
AS CONSTANCE AND
NAOMI TODD AS
SINISTRA WITH
TILESE HAIGHT AS
DEAD MUM

THE NEW HANSEL AND GRETEL

*The Fringe Festival's Constance & Sinestra gets
an Oregon premiere at LCC*

When the new musical *Constance & Sinestra and the Cabinet of Screams* premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the summer of 2011, Lane Community College student Anna Parks happened to catch a performance of the quirky show. Parks later brought the idea of presenting the offbeat musical to LCC's Student Production Association, and after clearing sizeable hurdles to secure the rights to the play, the LCC theater will be among the first venues outside of the UK to debut this darkly twisted fairy tale.

Constance and Sinestra are young sisters living a typical life in Victorian London: They're confined to a ruined house on the edge of a cliff; their taxidermist father's gone off his nut since the untimely death of his wife, who he's stuffed and propped up in the hallway; Sinestra collects the screams of the horrified people that look on her; and though Constance pines for the boy next door, he, not surprisingly, loves another. You know, *that* old chestnut.

"People can relate to outcasts," Director Michael P. Watkins says. The production leans on gothic aesthetics, serving as a dusky retelling of the *Hansel and Gretel* story. "It's about broken homes, about lost children," he says.

As director, Watkins says his role has been to balance the eerily Victorian look of the show with the dynamic interpersonal connections among the characters. "I believe it's these relationships that everyone can relate to, that makes the play accessible emotionally," he says.

Musically, its one-act format is infectious and inventive, but Watkins admits that the musical's origins in an alternative arts festival — albeit the biggest in the world — might have left something to be desired in terms of the songbook and lyrics' organization. Before rehearsals even began, Watkins says he and musical director Jim Greenwood worked closely with playwright and director Alexandra Spencer-Jones and composer Patrick Gleeson to quilt together a full script and complete music from the assorted materials that had been sent across the pond. One of the reasons for the challenge, Watkins notes, is that LCC will perform the piece with entirely live music, which wasn't attempted at Fringe.

Although the bizarre world that Constance and Sinestra inhabit might appear at the outset too stilted to be emotionally resonant, Watkins expresses certainty that audiences will be drawn in.

"It's like a dramedy," Watkins says. "If you treat the comedy, the drama handles itself, because it's in the script." He adds, "Really, it's a story about relationships, which is what I'm focusing on." — *Rachael Carnes*

Constance & Sinestra and the Cabinet of Screams runs 7 pm, Nov. 14-15 and Nov. 20-22, and 2 pm, Nov. 16, at LCC's Blue Door Theatre; \$10, \$5 seniors and students. Tickets available at lanec.edu/tickets or 463-5161.

21ST-CENTURY AUSTEN

University Theatre reimagines a modern Pride and Prejudice

Well, this is certainly not your grandmother's Jane Austen. With overt sexuality, barebones plotting and updated humor, University Theatre has taken Austen's beloved classic out for a new spin that, depending on your sensibility, may or may not make sense.

Pride and Prejudice is far and away Austen's best-known novel. Emerging from this eloquent study of character and society, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy stand out as one of the greatest romances of English literature. Any modern adaptation of a 19th-century novel faces a number of challenges, not the least of which is audience expectation.

Jon Jory's adaptation is an unapologetically modern play. Fast-paced, but with an ear for the more succulent wording of the original, Jory's script feels like an extract of a Bach symphony played faithfully on electric guitar.

This version of *Pride and Prejudice* is considerably better than the Joseph Hanreddy and J.R. Sullivan adaptation that played at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2010, but it still lacks the meditative reflections on ordinary human nature that make Austen's work so infinitely satisfying. Certain elements of the plot don't cohere and often seem silly when denied their place among so very many words.

If you are an Austen purist, UT's production might not be for you. If, however, you enjoy surveying the ways our collective imaginations have interpreted Austen's work over the past 15 years, UT's *Pride and Prejudice* is worth checking out.

As always at University Theatre, there are some very good performances. Michael Malek Najjar's direction grants loose reign to his young actors, resulting in a number of fun, unexpected takes on character. Katelyn Lewis and Jonas D. Israel are marvelous as Mrs. and Mr. Bennet. And Jerilyn Armstrong creates a modernized Elizabeth Bennet who is easy to identify with.

Alexandra Bonds' costuming reiterates the decidedly modern take on the story. The women were gowned to perfection with gorgeous Regency lines, and character is suggested with the splash of a non-period purple sari or a garish statement necklace. Bonds' sartorial vision for the men, though, was less successful. Whereas the tweaks of period and proportion work beautifully for the women, the character/costume link wasn't apparent in the men and winds up looking strained.

One of the pleasures of this production is watching a well-known story retooled for a college setting. Taken alongside the original, the play is hotter, goofier and more impatient with the class tensions and social mores of the author's era. If Austen was writing at a time when all human power, connection and sexuality were roiling together in a hermetically sealed pressure cooker, this troupe has completely blown the lid off. — *Anna Grace*

Pride and Prejudice plays through Nov. 22 at University Theatre; \$14-\$16.

JERILYN ARMSTRONG
AS ELIZABETH AND T.J.
LAGROW AS MR. DARCY

