

VLT

87th SEASON!

The Very Little Theatre

LOST IN YONKERS

Neil Simon's Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning play!

Directed by Chris Pinto

Oct. 9-11, 15-18, 22-24 7:30 pm curtain
2 pm Sunday matinees

Tix: \$18 (\$14 for Thursdays)

Box office open 2:00-5:00

Wed.-Sat., 2350 Hilyard St.

Tix on-line at www.TheVLT.com

541-344-7751

COTTAGE THEATRE

October 2 – 25

The soul-stirring rock musical
about the Passion of Christ



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A fantastical journey into
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FALL **BRAVO!** 2015

On the Boards

TALKING SHOP WITH
OREGON CONTEMPORARY THEATRE'S
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR CRAIG WILLIS

BY RACHAEL CARNES



Oregon Contemporary Theatre artistic director Craig Willis has a keen curatorial vision, one that's helping to shape the landscape of what's possible for the arts in Eugene.

"My predecessor had done a good job of trying to provide interesting, challenging work," Willis says, referring to OCT in its Lord Leebrick days, before he took the helm in 2003.

"Where I think I've differed is trying to take the audience with me — listening to what the audience is interested in and trying to blend with that," he continues. "The other big difference in the company is trying to build awareness of who we are and how good the product is."

Under Willis' guidance, OCT has consistently increased ticket sales, business sponsorships and foundational support. Artistically, the theater has developed relationships with new artists and broadened its networks.

It all starts with a season.

"There's an ongoing list of 10 to 12 plays that I've found, that I think we should produce," Willis says. "I share that with the staff and board, ask for their input. I touch base with directors, designers, actors. We look at the balance of what it is we're trying to do, to make sure we can really produce the shows well."

OCT delivers contemporary performance — fresh, innovative, challenging and often laugh-out-loud funny.

"One thing that has taken time is getting to the place of producing new work," Willis says. "Things that haven't been given the seal of approval by the Broadway critics."

When asked where his penchant for discovery comes from, Willis is clear. "One of my gifts, for better or worse, that I inherited from my mother, is a good business sense and an entrepreneurial spirit," he says.

Born in 1965 in Riverside, a little town north of Omak in central Washington, Willis's stepfather worked in construction and his mother was an "Avon lady." The family moved close to Bellingham when Willis was 5, but he ponders the path not taken. "What would it have been like to stay in Riverside and grow up a gay cowboy?" he asks.

Willis remembers a third-grade teacher who was into craft projects and a fourth-grade teacher who recognized his artistic interests and talent. "It was a different time," Willis says. "She managed to get the school district to pay for private art lessons for me — in painting and drawing."

In middle school, Willis explored choir, band and photography. In high school, "my English teacher announced auditions for the school play, and said I should go because I had a good voice," Willis says.

He got the part — his first role, playing a waiter in *The Mad Woman of Chaillot*.

Willis attended Western Washington University in Bellingham, graduating in 1987 with a theater degree. An MFA in '94 and a Ph.D. in '03 from the University of Oregon followed.

"I naturally fell towards directing," Willis says.

And in his work with OCT, Willis skillfully bridges the artistic and the administrative. Yet within the varied aspects of his job, from directing and design to development and marketing, Willis credits his capable colleagues rather than his own obvious abilities.

"I wish I had the budget to clone a couple of my staff members," Willis says. "[Associate producer] Tara Wibrew, [production manager] Geno Franco, [box office manager and volunteer coordinator] Mary Wetherbee, [accounting manager] Michelle Perino — they're all good complements to what I do."

"We all wear multiple hats, especially Geno, Tara and I," he adds. "We are all both working artists and arts administrators."

"Our experience and talent as artists enhances our work as administrators," Willis continues. "Vision, problem-solving, communication skills, working under a deadline — these are all things that good artists and good administrators have."

And in the performing arts, no man is an island.

"One of the ways I've had to grow the most," Willis says, "is that I'm a great solo performer. But how to hold on to that enthusiasm and vision and bring other people along is something I've been cultivating."

The OCT journey has been helped along by business leaders joining its board of directors, "influencing direction and improving me as a leader," Willis says.

Sometimes those changes increase comfort for the audience, like raising needed funds for OCT's delightful new bathrooms.

Other times, it's a shift in regional and national reach, such as OCT's membership in the groundbreaking National New Play Network, an interconnected web of venues and artists participating in the Rolling World Premiere program (See May 28 edition of *EW*, "Theater on the Move," wkly.ws/22m).

"Being a fly on the wall for other people's productions, we're in a place where the playwrights are involved in our work," Willis says.

OCT is on the rise.

And even in this era of cocooning at home in front of the TV, there's just no substitute for live performance.

"The audible gasp, the talking at intermission, we're genetically programmed to mirror what we watch — I do it in rehearsal all the time," Willis says.

"If it's programmed into us, it must be something we need." ■

A full line-up of OCT's new season is available at octheatre.org.