

FUN REIGNS

ACE's production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* isn't a theatrical, it's a spectacular

It makes me all fizzy and giddy to see men dress up like women. There's something so joyously liberating about it all. And I don't think I'm the only one who finds female impersonators a total hoot and super sexy. Gay, straight, bi, femme, butch, blah blah blah: Just about everyone I know gets chirpy at the sight of an aging queen squeezed into a sleek satin dress and bellowing "I Will Survive" like a diva in heat.

The only people who disapprove of such a glorious spectacle are pinched-up prudes and freaky deacons who still believe there's something larcenous at stake in the fluid play of gender — the same people who slap toys out of the hands of children and tsk-tsk you about your potty mouth. Go away!

Which brings us to *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, now in production at Actors Cabaret of Eugene. Adapted from the hit 1994 Australian film *The Adventure of Priscilla*, etc., this stage show, directed by ACE's Joe Zingo, is a disco-rific celebration of the glitz and ragged glamour of three friends who travel into the Australian outback to perform their girly show in front of the drunken denizens of the desert.

Of course, the narrative threads — unexpected romance, overcoming homophobia, money and vehicle problems, one performer's family secret or, rather, secret family — are important here, but way less so than in the film. ACE's *Priscilla* focuses, rightly, on the sheer pomp and circumstance of the stage show, and in this the production is a success, full of outrageous costumes and oodles of musical numbers. Fun is the operative word; this is a really fun, and funny, show.

Does it matter that the production isn't perfect? (It's



ANTHONY KRALL IN ACE'S
PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT

not, and it doesn't.) What counts here is the sheer energy of the cast, which seeks emphatically to connect with the audience. The leads go all in: With his gravelly voice and wry, exhausted vibe, Michael Watkins is perfectly suited to the role of the recently widowed Bernadette, the group's elder statesman; Sheldon Hall is appropriately snarky and wild-oatish as the cubby Felicia Jolly Goodfellow; and Anthony Krall takes the cake as Mitzi, a tall drink of water seeking frantically to come to terms with the past.

Bruce McCarthy is adorably sweet as Bob, the outback mechanic who develops a crush on Bernadette, and Justin Stafford (aka Trai La Trash) sets a frisky tone as the emcee Miss Understanding.

As usual, Zingo makes great use of the stage and beyond, orchestrating the action in such a way that the performance is always spilling out into the audience, creating a strong sense of immediacy and participation. The backing cast is

a kick in the pants, especially the three divas (Jenny Parks, Laura Holden, Emily Westlund), who provide a sort of melodic counterpoint to the leads.

And the seemingly endless outfits of the main performers are extravagantly extravagant and eye-popping; if for no other reason, go to behold the costumes — especially those righteous floor-length flares and the outrageous lizard get-up created by designer Mary Jensen.

Like much of what ACE does, *Priscilla* is less theatrical than spectacular, a kind of pageant that strives to connect with its audience in a way that is at once nostalgic and celebratory. It's a low-risk, high-reward operation, and that's just fine. The idea is not to push the audience but pull it in, and *Priscilla* does that in splendid fashion, like fishing with a feather boa.

Priscilla, Queen of the Desert plays at Actors Cabaret of Eugene through Oct. 14; \$16-42.95, tickets at 541-683-4368.



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