CAST OF *THE EXPLORER'S CLUB*

PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHEELAND

Boys Will Be Boys

GENTLEMEN SCIENTISTS GATHER IN VLT'S COMIC ROMP *THE EXPLORER'S CLUB*

BY RACHAEL CARNES

Legend has it that when a team of British archaeologists outfitted themselves to excavate the tomb of King Tutankhamen, their journey began with an errand to London's famed Fortnum & Mason, purveyors of biscuits and tinned meats to the Queen since 1707.

In fact, the spoils of the archaeologists' successful journey to the North African desert were then packed in the now-empty picnic tins and wooden crates they schlepped to Egypt: untold treasures, millennia-old, brought back to the waiting Empire in crocks labeled "Potted Stilton" and "Waxed Cheddar Truckle." (Because, if we're going to the colonies, we bloody well better have our cheeses.)

It's in this daffy, devil-may-care vein that we find Nell Benjamin's hilarious play *The Explorer's Club*, playing now at Very Little Theatre (VLT).

We're in London, 1879, in the hallowed halls of a gentleman's club (the name had a different meaning back then), a brotherly society dedicated to loose science and hard drinking.

One of its members, Lucius Fretway (played with exasperated zip by Russell Dyball) asks his brethren to consider a woman, Phyllida Spotte-Hume (the delightful Martha Benson) for membership in their exclusive and traditionally all-male society. (Wait: Hume? As in David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, historian, economist and champion of skepticism and naturalism? Well-played, cheeky playwright...)

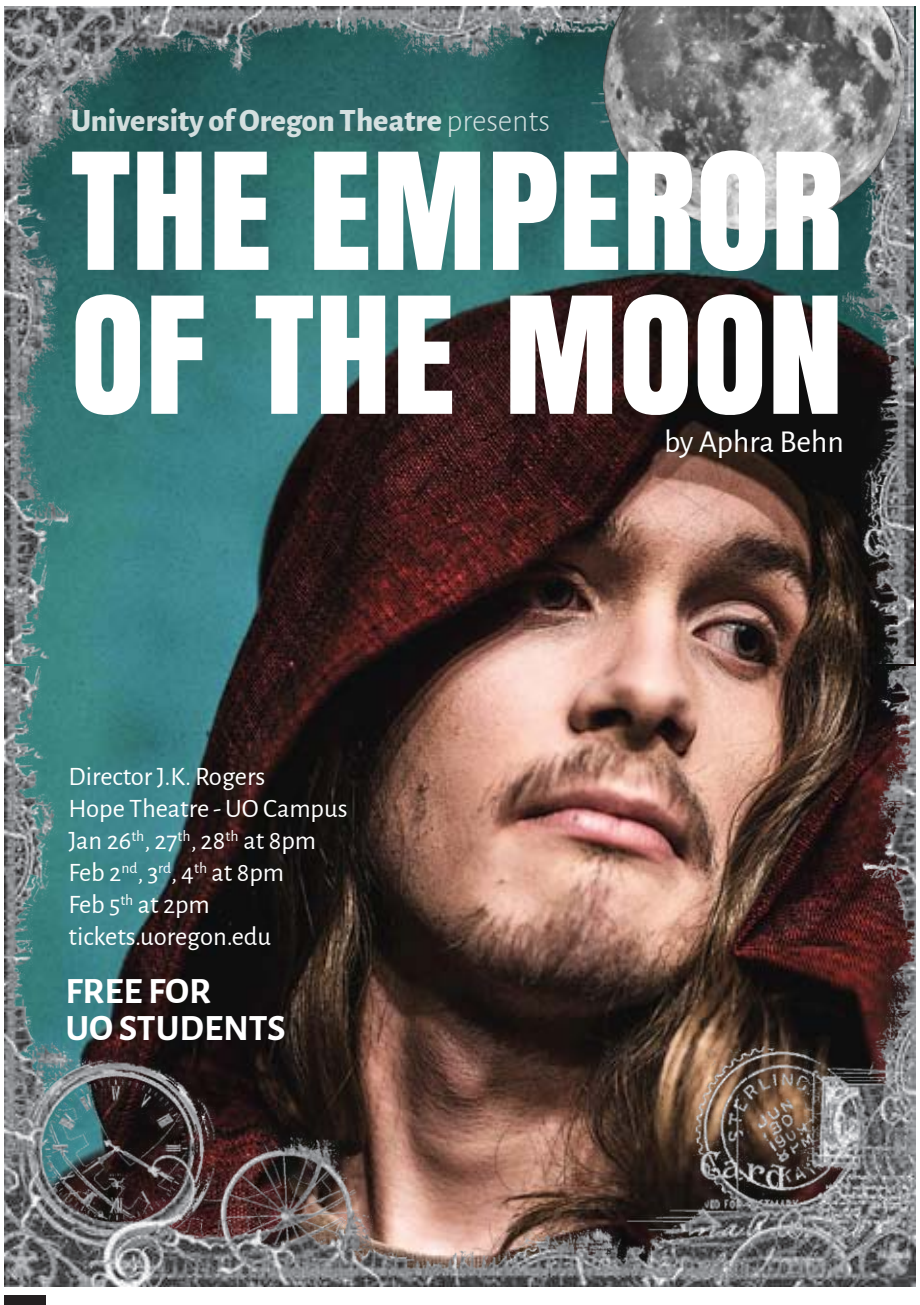
Director Chris McVay plumbs the silly script for plenty of laughs, and his effervescent cast bubbles over with energy and humor. As a trio of bumbling professors, Don Aday, Achilles Massahos and Scott Frazier-Maskiell ramp up the conflict throughout this sturdy farce.

Gentleman-explorer and dimwit Harry Piercy — who could be lifted from the pages of P.G. Wodehouse — played by Michael Teague, and Luigi, played by Darius Bunce, add to the visual sight gags and general excitement.

And Bill Campbell, as Sir Bernard Humphries, has a debonair air, masking the character's utter vapidity. Was it the Greek philosopher Aristotle who said seeing one character onstage always a tick or two behind is as delicious as anything one could possible behold? No? I haven't cited my sources? Oh well, neither has this ragtag crew of academic blowhards.

Smaller roles are also top-shelf.

The play's set — a glorious, multi-level masterpiece designed by Amy Bowman Dunn, replete with imperial-era tchotchkes and period detailing — feels like a journey to the stuffy and bizarre Victoria and Albert Museum.

And first-rate costumes by Marie Slatton-Valle, with clever repurposing and original designs, even elicit giggles in and of themselves.

The Explorer's Club *continues at the Very Little Theatre through Jan. 28. $12-$23, tickets at thevlt.com or 541-344-7751.*