

# IDENTITY POLITICS

LCC's excellent student production *Constant Revolution* takes on sticky issues of authenticity



PIA SOSA  
HILDENBRANDT IN  
LCC'S *CONSTANT  
REVOLUTION*

PHOTO: DUSTIN NAGY

Identity is a bitch. By the time we're grown up enough to ask ourselves who we are and what the hell we're doing with this thing called life, we realize our so-called self is an infinitely convoluted and mysterious patchwork — a mashup of past indignities, adopted attitudes and a certain incommunicable something howling deep inside for meaning and contact.

The search for identity and authenticity is at the heart of *Constant Revolution*, a fetching new work written and performed by students in Lane Community College's theater arts program. The play, directed by Willow Norton, is itself something of a quilt, an assemblage of bits and pieces of individual stories stitched together by themes that are distinctly existential, and which constantly complicate the dilemma of being and becoming.

The young cast — Darius Bunce, Sabrina Gross, Pia Sosa Hildenbrandt, Milo Kent-Pettit, Emma Rain and Alex Vowles — is uniformly excellent, and boy can they write. The intersecting skits and soliloquies, which take on everything from early romance and identity politics to consumer ennui and the crunch of career choices, exhibit a surprising

level of maturity and sophistication. They are by turns surreal and pedestrian, played out on a stark stage that becomes at one moment a wintry dreamscape, at another the setting for a teenage party.

*Constant Revolution* finds a delicate balance between narcissistic obsession and human communion, as each actor brings an isolated and beleaguered self to bear upon the world, sometimes bumping up against one another, striking sparks of recognition or fanning the flames of incomprehension. Such is life, but the play deepens our everyday experience by making our interior monologues explicit and therefore lyrical, loaded with yearning. Imagine Beckett in the land of Millennials, with their cell phones, sinister ironies and downgraded opportunities. *Waiting for Go*, perhaps.

But, unlike Beckett, the play refuses to wallow in a fumblesome striving that forever veers toward nihilism. Yes, *Constant Revolution* takes on the big ontological and existential questions of life, but it does so with a spirit that is essentially optimistic. Communication may crumble, but its crumbs can mark a path that leads to under-

standing. It finds its guiding principle in a poem by Jack London, a line of which states, "The function of man is to live, not to exist." Living, unlike merely existing, is a kind of artistry — an authoring of the self that is itself a creative act, a moving from inwardness outward.

In this sense, the play's title reveals a dual meaning: It is at once highly personal and implicitly political. To confront the world with one's truest self, a thing of perpetual motion, is a supremely revolutionary act. The stories that comprise *Constant Revolution* would seem to argue that identity can't be purchased in the marketplace, nor can it be constructed in bitterness and fear.

The play answers Beckett's famous line — "I can't go on, I must go on" — with a simple affirmative: Go on. This is the hope that trumps all despair, and it's inspiring to behold in a troupe of young artists, especially in these dark days. It is, and ever has been, the only hope we have. ■

*Constant Revolution* plays 7:30 pm Thursday through Friday, Feb. 23-25, and 3:30 pm Sunday, Feb. 26, at LCC's Blue Door Theatre; \$10, students and staff free.

# MELANCHOLY BROUGHT TO LIFE THROUGH MUSIC

Violinist Cullen Vance creates the cello's voice for OCT's production of *Melancholy Play*

Sarah Ruhl's *Melancholy Play*, opening Friday night, Feb. 24, at Oregon Contemporary Theatre, posits an idea that seems utterly un-American: What if it's OK *not* to be happy? What if we don't need to smile all the time, despite our ingrained right to the pursuit of happiness?

That radical notion formed an emotional starting point for Eugene musician and performer Cullen Vance, who

was brought into the OCT production of *Melancholy* by director Tara Wibrew to compose a half hour of cello music to be performed on stage by Julian, one of the characters in the play. The music is almost Julian's only voice in the show.

"*Melancholy Play* explores something we may be losing in a society that's obsessed with being happy," Vance says. "What have we lost in a society that's trying so hard to fight depression?"

Ruhl's script specifies that a cello be played, but doesn't say what the music should be.

"*Melancholy* is very simple," Vance says. "The people on stage can never say one thing and be thinking another. That's one of the things I love about Sarah Ruhl. There's never any subtext."

Vance, 25, came to Eugene three years ago from Turlock, California, where he grew up the son of a Marine drill sergeant. Since they arrived here, he and his wife, Mia, have both begun to make their marks in the local arts world. He's performed for children at the Oregon Bach Festival and at Saturday Market and has taught theater at Springfield's Academy of Arts and Academics; she runs a fusion belly dance troupe.

With a background in both theater and music, Vance has long been comfortable combining the two forms. "Every time I direct a show I write a little music for it," he says. "And when I write music for a play, it's completely intertwined, not just with the characters but with the heartbeat and tempo of the show."

Vance has thought a lot about the role of music in the play. "What I've tried to do is have the music be the fourth wall, the thing that connects what's on stage to the audience."

He has built much of the music for *Melancholy Play* around a major seventh chord, that slightly bright but unresolved sound that makes the blues sound like the blues. "That seventh wants to resolve," he says. "But at the same time you don't want it to resolve."

Vance is self-taught as a musician. All his composition is done through improvisation.

Ruhl won a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellowship in 2006. Her plays include *The Clean House*, which ran at OCT in 2009, and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, which ran at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival the same year. ■

The OCT production of *Melancholy Play* runs features an ensemble cast with Ben Brinkley, Leslie Jones, Chelsey Megli, Tracy Nygard, Kelly Oristano and Joseph Workman. The show runs Friday, Feb. 24, through March 12 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; tickets are \$15 to \$35 at octtheatre.org.