

VERY LITTLE THEATRE

*In business for nine decades,
VLT keeps training actors and
turning out shows*

BY SARAROSA DAVIES

ALISON MEELER AND
PETER FEHRS IN
PERFECT WEDDING

It's 10 in the morning on a Saturday last spring, and Very Little Theatre has its doors wide open. Hopeful actors sit inside the building, tapping their feet and talking in quiet whispers. The theater itself is dark like the interior of a ship's wooden hull, but the stage lights are shining on a set.

This is audition day at one of the oldest community theaters in the country — and hearts are racing. The show these hopefuls are auditioning for is British playwright Robin Hawdon's *Perfect Wedding*, the penultimate show in the theater's 2016-2017 season.

As Eugene's theater scene grows and matures, the role of community theater has become even more vital, both as a training ground for actors and technicians and as a vehicle for audience development. VLT may be Eugene's oldest theater, but it's just one of a tidal wave of performing groups in town.

Besides VLT, Oregon Contemporary Theatre leads a local

scene that includes The Shedd Theatricals, Actors Cabaret of Eugene, Radio Redux, Free Shakespeare in the Park, Roving Park Players, Not Ready for Retirement Players and No Shame Theatre, as well as theater departments at the University of Oregon, Lane Community College and a handful of private colleges here. Venture a short drive out of town and you've got Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove.

For a place that calls itself "very little," VLT's building, a charmingly antique wooden Quonset hut at 23rd Avenue and Hilyard Street, is bigger than it seems from outside. With two performance spaces — the smaller studio Stage Left and the 220-seat Mainstage — the VLT produces a range of plays and musicals throughout the year.

The lobby is covered in posters from past shows such as *My Fair Lady* and *Death of a Salesman*. It also features costumes and a glass case full of trinkets related to the theater's current show.

In a hall parallel to the two performance spaces, a framed poster board features pictures of other "little theaters" in small towns across the country. A card on the board reads, "Community Theatre is Alive and Well!!"

The VLT was founded in 1929 by eight local theater lovers as part of the Little Theatre Movement, which swept North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Influenced by European art houses, scores of small amateur theaters popped up around the United States and Canada to present experimental fare that couldn't find a home in the commercialism of Broadway.

VLT's website says of the theater company's founding: "One person said to the others, 'There are hundreds of little theatre groups up and down the country, but this is certainly going to be a very little one!'"

This passionate sentiment is what drives those involved with VLT's shows, including *Perfect Wedding* director Kar-



THE CAST OF VLT'S
PERFECT WEDDING



SAMANTHA CROSS (LEFT), ALISON MEELER AND DIANA SOBCZYNSKI