

WOU to perform 'Radium Girls'

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

MONMOUTH — "Radium Girls" takes the audience on a historic journey ripe with facts, sprinkled with humor and warmth, recounting the story about women who worked for the U.S. Radium Corporation.

Western Oregon University's Theatre and Dance Department will present the play starting Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Rice Auditorium.

The story starts in the early 1900s, with a group of young women — some as young as 16 — painting watch dials with Radium so the numbers will glow in the dark.

"It was for the soldiers during World War I," said Mindy Mawhirter, who plays Kathryn. "So it was this great invention that was doing really great things, and then it also happened to kill you."

The girls were trained to tip the brushes — that still held the Radium paint — into their mouths to get a good point on the ends. While they tried to use a different, safer method — using a cloth to wipe the brushes — the workers were told to go back to the old way, using their mouths, to save on paint costs and preserve the brushes.

"They had us switch," said Andi Moring, who plays Grace. "It was wasting too much paint, so we had to start doing it in the mouth again."

The play's story is told over a span of decades as Grace, Kathryn and other girls suffer the consequences of the company's actions and policies.

"We start noticing our



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-Observer

Western Oregon University's Theatre and Dance Department will perform "Radium Girls" Thursday through Sunday and Nov. 15-18.

friends are dying," Moring said. "And we're getting sicker."

"We're putting the radium paint in our mouth, so we have radiation poisoning in our jaws," Mawhirter said. "That is what the story is about."

"It's about how companies were able to take advantage of their workers and kind of sweep things under the rug," Moring added.

The show is more than the account of the first work-related injury case in the country. It illustrates how science is constantly changing.

Radium "is a miracle drug," Mawhirter said. "It's the cure for cancer. Like, how could it be dangerous if it's curing cancer? ... It's an interesting show, and it's relevant. There's more to be learned."

The play also shows how different people handle different things, even if they come from similar backgrounds, Mawhirter said.

"We're both dial painters at the beginning," she said. "We're both in similar situa-

tions, same age, all that stuff, but faced with the same situation, we both react very differently."

Radiation poisoning and the ensuing legal battle with the U.S. Radium Corporation makes Grace stronger, while defeating Kathryn.

"I start the show being very — I don't want to say complacent — but kind of complacent," Moring said of her character. "I just do what I'm told. All my life, I've done what other people have told me to do, and it led to me getting sick. I gain strength through my sickness by being able to stand up for myself and take on the world, even though I'm

Radium Girls

What: Western Oregon University presents "Radium Girls," by D.W. Gregory.

When: Thursday through Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Nov. 15 through 18, 7:30 p.m. A matinee will be at noon on Sunday.

Where: WOU's Rice Auditorium.

Admission: General, \$14; students with ID, \$8; seniors, \$10.

For more information: wou.edu.

very sick."

Kathryn is the opposite, Mawhirter said.

"She starts out super strong and happy, and her sickness defeats her," she said. "She doesn't have as much internal strength as she likes to think she does. Grace grows every time she's

attacked, and Kathryn gets smaller and smaller."

The play is directed by Michael Phillips, with costumes designed by special guest artist Jenny Amper-sand, a theatrical designer who works primarily with the Portland theater community.

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