

Laughter served in Coaster's 'Don't Dress for Dinner'

By Nancy McCarthy
For EO Media Group

Those who attend "Don't Dress for Dinner" at the Coaster Theatre Playhouse won't have to wear formal attire, but they will have to bring an appetite for a comedy full of laughs.

In this tightly written romp that resembles a Shakespearean farce, the question to be considered by the actors and the audience alike is: Who is whom when?

Director Mick Alderman manages to keep the dizzying disarray of mistresses, friends, cooks and Suzis flowing smoothly. That may be because this is the third time he has encountered the play. He directed it as a readers theater for an American Association of University Women benefit in 2001 and designed the lighting for it when it was staged at the former River Theater in Astoria in 2007.

"I found it hysterical," Alderman said. "I laughed all the way through rehearsals. It keeps me laughing. In my 30 years of theater, I've never seen a funnier play."

A local playwright, filmmaker, actor and author, Alderman began telling stories in grade and high school when he and his friends filmed stop-motion animations with clay and action figures. In a theater class at Clatsop Community College, teacher Del Corbett taught Alderman how to design the lighting for theatrical productions, and Alderman has been doing that for several years at the Coaster Theatre and other North Coast venues.

As a screenwriter, Alderman wrote the scripts for several of his own films, including the supernatural thriller "Haunted Shore," winner of the Best Narrative Feature of a Pacific Northwest Filmmaker at the Eugene International Film Festival of 2011.

Several of his own full-length plays have been staged locally.

Alderman also authored a memoir, "Three Weeks With the Goonies," detailing his experience on the set of "The Goonies" as a guest of director Richard Donner when the movie was shot in Astoria in 1984.



Suzette, played by Jean Rice, center, pretends to be the mistress of Robert, played by Jason Husa, left, who is actually having an affair with his best friend's wife, Jacqueline, played by Jenni Tronier, right.

The "fun part" about directing a play, Alderman said, is not having to worry about camera angles and lighting each scene, which requires so much attention when making films.

"When I'm doing that, I don't get to interact with the actors, but as a director, all I have to worry about is the acting, and that was great. We just have to tell the story."

The story of "Don't Dress for Dinner" takes place outside of Paris. Bernard has invited his mistress, Suzanne, to his home while his wife, Jacqueline, is away for the weekend. Bernard's best friend, Robert — who, it turns out, is Jacqueline's lover (unbeknownst to Bernard) — also is visiting, unaware that he is to act as Bernard's alibi for that weekend.

When Jacqueline finds out that Robert is arriving, she decides to stay home, unaware of Bernard's mistress or of her impending visit. Meanwhile, Suzette, a cook who Bernard has hired to prepare a gourmet dinner for Suzanne, also arrives. Bernard's attempts to keep his affair secret, along with Robert's and Jacqueline's worries that Bernard will discover their duplicity, makes for a fast-paced frolic on stage.

"It's sort of a commentary on a lot of things," Alderman said. It's primarily an exploration of human nature, he added. "We're laughing at ourselves. The situation is so absurd yet so human."

Playing the roles of Bernard and Jacqueline are Ryan Hull and Jenni Tronier, who are married to each other.

Hull, who has directed and acted in plays at the Coaster, said he was a "fish out of water when it came to the circumstances Bernard faces."

"It's been a challenge to cheat on my acting wife when it's my real wife, which I would never think to do, except when we're on stage. Oh my, this is complicated," Hull said.

Hull and Tronier, who works as public relations and operations manager at the Coaster, co-founded a production company and produced several plays before moving to Cannon Beach.

Jean Rice plays Suzette, the cook who has to pretend she is Robert's mistress, while the mistress, Suzanne, pretends she is the cook who can't cook (as noted, it's complicated).

Rice says her character is the only level-headed member in the ensemble. But to prepare for the play, she had to develop two different voices and mannerisms.

"I hope the audience leaves the theater wanting to see more shows because this one was a hoot!" Rice said.

Also appearing in the play are Rhonda Alderman, as the mistress; and Stewart Martin, as Suzette's husband. Local

actor Jason Husa, who plays Robert, filled in two weeks before the play opened to replace Richard Bowman, who originally was cast in the part and had to drop out following a family emergency.

"Casting is the key element to any play," Alderman said. "There's not a person involved in this play that doesn't have at least a dozen shows behind them. They know very well what they're doing. That's

good, since I'm not an acting teacher."

Even the stage set becomes a character in the play. All of the action occurs in a stylishly renovated barn. The kitchen is the former dairy, the dining room is the former hen house and two guest bedrooms are the old cow shed and piggery.

"I wanted to go with the idea that they used everything that had been in the barn," Alderman said.

To create the ambiance, Alderman's father, Jerry, gathered up 30 old pallets donated by Astoria Warehousing Inc.

"He spent weeks pulling those pallets apart," Alderman said. "There are 200 planks that make up the bulk of the walls (around the stage). We wanted it to look like old lumber."

Jerry, an experienced carpenter, and Kent Cloyd, from Coaster Construction, put the walls up, and Alderman stained all of them. Jerry also built sliding barn doors leading to the two bedrooms.

Then, Jerry found planks that had been used as benches during an outdoor wedding at a dairy near Alderman's house. A few of those 30-foot-long planks were cut up to create stairs, a bar and shelves behind the bar.

The set heightens the humor for the audience, a goal Alderman wants to achieve.

"I just want them to laugh," he said. "I can't believe they won't."



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