

A powerful production of one of Arthur Kopit's plays inaugurates Portland's newest theater company.

## The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real

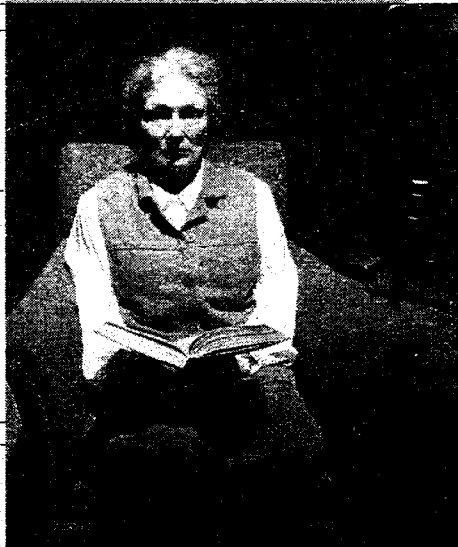
STAGE REVIEW

**Wings**

The Profile Theater  
Project at the Main  
Street Theater  
904 SW Main St.,  
242-0080  
8 pm Thursdays-  
Saturdays,  
3 pm Sundays  
Closes Feb. 22  
\$16

In the wake of Portland Repertory Theater's sudden demise, there has been much fear for the future of theater in Portland. The repercussions of the Rep's folding have yet to be fully felt, but the loss of the city's oldest professional company is immeasurable. In a strange twist of fate, the first public distress signals from the debt-ridden Rep coincided with the announcement that directors Jane Unger and Lisa DeGrace would be launching a new theater company. The timing for such a venture seemed daring, as more than just one theater in town was suffering financially. Yet from the first, Unger and DeGrace's Profile Theater Project would be a new departure and bold undertaking. Taking their cue from the Signature Theater in New York, the two decided to create a company focused on writing—a brave, if not quixotic, approach in our post-literate culture. Like Signature, Profile Theater Project would concentrate each season on the work of one playwright, and both Unger and DeGrace agreed to first explore the work of Arthur Kopit. Kopit's position in the modern canon of American theater seems unsure at present, but only because he's yet to be recognized as one of America's major playwrights. Time, and such enterprises as Profile, will rectify this oversight, and Kopit's work will take its rightful place in the national repertoire, replacing the vapid *Love! Valor! and Burn This*.

"Arthur Kopit is an entrepreneur of the extraordinary. For over 30 years, his plays have been ahead of the theatrical times.... Kopit is one of America's most playful and prophetic playwrights, by turns ingenious, hilarious and sensational. His plays are among the high-water marks of American theater."  
—John Lahr



Faultless:  
Gaynor Sterchi  
as Emily Stilson  
in Arthur Kopit's  
*Wings*

The first play of Kopit's chosen for production in *Wings*, which he wrote in 1978, elaborating on an earlier radio play he'd written. The events in *Wings*, which follow the internal struggle of a stroke victim, were inspired by Kopit's experiences during his father's slow recovery from a catastrophic stroke. The result of what Kopit witnessed in the rehabilitation ward drives *Wings*. On a simple level, the play is a brilliant and harrowing journey into the fractured mind of an aphasiac. But Kopit sets himself an even tougher task. While watching his father strain against incomprehension, he continually asked himself what it was like inside. The result of this inquiry has produced a work of philosophical and psychological depth unequalled in recent American drama. It evokes the best of O'Neill's experiments; furthermore, it stands as an astonishing exploration of postmodern thought. Whether influenced or independent, Kopit explicates Lacan's broad theories of the psyche and mind.

In a small but comfortable living room, Emily Stilson is sitting in an overstuffed chair, reading. It is a picture of contentment. To her left, a floor lamp sheds the light she reads by, and to her right stands an antique clock. Suddenly, the lamp disappears.

Mrs. Stilson looks up from her book sensing something is wrong. Then the clock misses a beat. She looks toward it only to find that it has vanished. Emily Stilson has found herself in the throes of a stroke, which will alter her existence irrevocably. Kopit's construction of the affliction is masterful. The failing light and malfunctioning clock foredoom the unsuspecting Stilson to the fragmentation of clarity and time. What follows is a catastrophe with little to ameliorate the pain. Confusion reigns. Stilson is thrown against a wall of noise and crushed by images glimpsed as if by lightning in a dream. She struggles to make sense of what's happening to her, and we are privy to her inner monologue. Kopit's exploration of an aphasic mind is astounding and can only be compared to the voice of Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

"There I go there I go hallway now it's screaming crowded pokes me then the coolbreeze needle scent of sweetness can see palms flowers flummers couldn't fix the leaking sprouting everywhere to save me help me CUTS UP THROUGH to something movement I am something moving without Movement!" It is a brutal and unforgettable poetry. For *Wings* to work, one must have a strong actor to make Emily Stilson live, and this production is blessed with one of the finest performances this reviewer has seen. There are few superlatives that can do justice to Gaynor Sterchi's Emily Stilson. Sterchi has provided numerous great performances, and here she adds another to her fine career. She balances the horror and pathos with humor and steeled resolve perfectly. Sterchi is faultless, and as with the performances of Gretchen Corbett and Wayne Ballantyne in the Rep's *Molly Sweeney*, one wants to beg young actors to come and see first-hand the height of their art.

*Wings* also fully establishes Jane Unger as one of the city's finest directors. Unger's understanding and staging of the play reveal a fierce intelligence. Her co-creation of Profile comes at a critical time for Portland theaters. What befell the Rep is awful indeed, but here is hope.