

'Stendhal Syndrome' is thought-provoking humor.

The nature of art is pondered in Profile Theatre Project's new production

By **BOB HICKS**
THE OREGONIAN

"Give them profile, lots of profile. They love your profile!" the conductor preens, caught up in an ecstasy that's wedded to and at the same time utterly dissociated from the orchestra's Wagnerian swell of sound.

The actor is Tracy Hinkson.

The model is Lenny Bernstein.

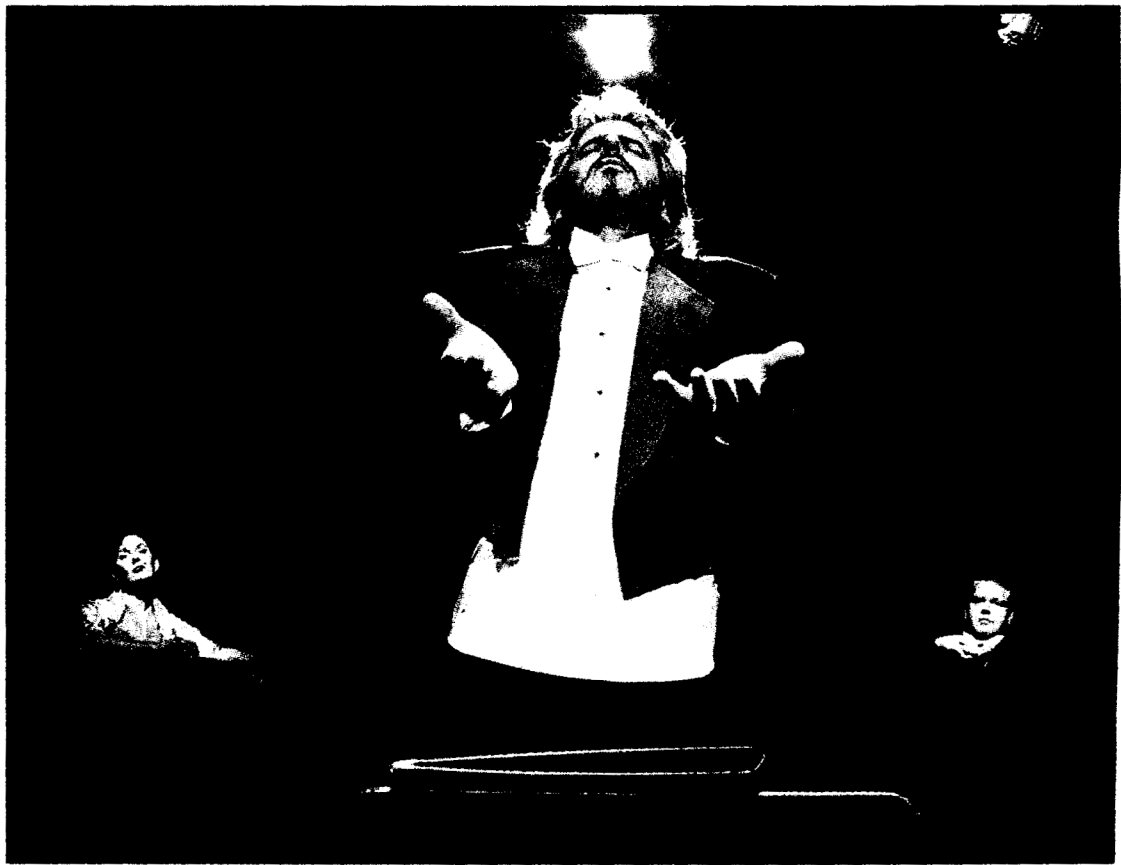
The play is "Prelude and Liebestod," the second half of Terrence McNally's paired one-acts collectively called "The Stendhal Syndrome."

And the result, at Profile Theatre Project, is maybe the smoothest, funniest and downright showiest show in town.

All right, not the deepest, and not the most ambitious. But for all its lightness, "Stendhal" is also pleasingly thought-provoking — and a true kick in the pants.

"The Stendhal Syndrome" premiered last spring in New York, and Profile's production, the first of its season of plays by McNally, is the West Coast premiere. Profile could have begun its season with any number of well-known McNally plays, from "The Master Class" to "Love! Valour! Compassion!" But "Stendhal," which so neatly distills McNally's recurrent ponderings on the sacred and profane nature of great art and our wayward yet awestruck response to it, seems the perfect choice.

And Hinkson the perfect actor. As directed with musical nuance by Jane Unger, Hinkson's portrayal of a grandiloquent, self-obsessed orchestral conductor on



JAMIE BOSWORTH

Tracy Hinkson plays a self-obsessed orchestral conductor in "The Stendhal Syndrome."

THEATER REVIEW

The Stendhal Syndrome

Company: Profile Theatre Project

Where: Theater! Theatrel, 3430 S.E. Belmont St.

When: Continues 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 14

Tickets: \$12-\$25, 503-242-0080, www.profiletheatre.org

the beginning and ending of Wagner's opera "Tristan und Isolde," is the conductor's free-associating riffs on what he'd like to do, when he'd like to do it, and whom he'd like to do it with, in crude and plainspoken detail. In Hinkson's hands it's a lewd, vulgar, fatuous, pansexual and very funny running commentary, at the same time a rebuff to the notion that great art elevates and an odd affirmation of it. "I've just never found anyone as interesting as me," the conductor sighs in an autoerotic swoon — but when he says it, he knows he's deluding himself.

Intellectual groundwork for Hinkson's tour-de-force. Think of it as a Poussin painting, all rational and orderly, hanging next to the great messy turmoil of a Caravaggio and helping you make sense of its libertine outpouring.

The nudity is, indeed, full frontal, but it isn't by the actors: It's Michelangelo's David, in all its ravishing marble beauty, casting its alluringly sexual and surprisingly spiritual spell over a group of American tourists. (Jeff Seats' set, which consists mostly of snippets of statue, photographed and blown up into a giant collage with David's gorgeous private parts on full display, wittily sets the tone.)

Powell stars as Bimbi, a tour guide who's trying to get her visitors to appreciate the quietly ravishing power of what's in front of their noses. Shininger and Van Voris have other, more earthy, things on their minds. Heath is a retired professor on a pilgrimage who's just lost his wife. He's a gifted

farceur, and nobody in town does exasperated crackpot better. When he also opens up emotionally, as he does here, he's a pleasure to watch.

There are lots of crudities in both of these plays, which together address the seductiveness of great art and its almost physical effect. The message is twofold: Great art reaches people where they are and begins its conversation; to get to the sacred, you must also understand the profane.

And did I mention it's funny?



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