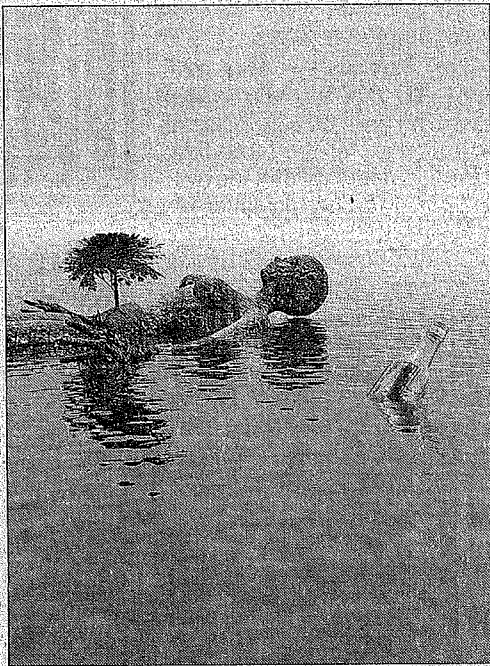


John Guare's strange and darkly comic meditation on American life, "Landscape of the Body," is getting a sharp production from Profile Theatre, directed by Jane Unger.

PROFILE THEATRE



Theater review

Life's little postcards play for drama, laughs

"Landscape" | A fine cast gives life to the characters in John Guare's play at Profile

By **MICHAEL MCGREGOR**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Early in John Guare's "Landscape of the Body" a man in Groucho Marx glasses tries to impress a woman on the deck of a Nantucket ferry by using a postcard of the passing Kennedy compound to point out which house is whose. He finds, however, that the postcard has the buildings wrong. It doesn't, as he says, "match up to reality."

His words are a perfect summary of Guare's lushly layered, outlandishly funny and fractured play. Instead of a linear plot, Guare gives us a series of postcards clung to by characters whose dreams and personal stories always come up short.

The postcards are made up of razor-sharp language, arresting vignettes and macabre humor with sometimes jarring shifts between them. It is difficult to capture them all and make them cohere, but Profile Theatre's production comes close to getting everything right.

Director Jane Unger lets the play's individual moments stand on their own, trusting her cast to enliven the stories each character has to tell. The result is a show that lives in the moment in all the best ways.

As if to emphasize that period details and even location don't matter ("Landscape" was written 30 years ago and set in New York), scenic designer Tim Stapleton leaves the stage mostly bare, adding only a table and a huge blue box, the top of which serves as the ferry deck. Smaller boxes slide out of the bigger one to become a luncheonette booth or a bed. The real decorations here are the stories.

Kelley Marchant grounds the production with a supple performance as Betty, a naive woman from Maine who takes her teenage son Bert (Derek Herman in a solid, energetic portrayal) down to New York City's Greenwich Village to try to bring her more worldly sister, Rosalie (Jami Chatalas Blanchard), back home.

When a callous bicycle rider (Danny Bruno in one of the funniest 60-second bursts of acting you're ever going to see in Portland) runs Rosalie down, Betty takes over her life. This includes acting in porn movies and working for a Cuban con man named Raulito (Jason Maniccia) who offers newlyweds bogus honeymoon vacations.

The corrupting influence of rough 1970s New York takes its toll when Bert, who has fallen in with a tough group of kids and turned to crime, winds up a stiff in the river, minus his head. Meanwhile, Durwood Peach (Damon Kupper), a rich man with mental problems, has lured Betty to South Carolina with pictures of his mansion and promises of love. When Betty returns to New York, she finds herself accused of murdering her son.

It doesn't really matter if you follow all that. It's only plot. And Guare is less interested in plot than his characters' stories. Their dreams, fanciful stories that reveal their inchoate yearnings to transcend their lives. Unfocused dreams that end in disappointment when they aren't cut short by senseless death.

We are all alone, he seems to say, and all ridiculous, but that's what makes life, life.

It is these small, individual combinations of yearning and ridiculousness that the Profile cast plays especially well: Maniccia's Raulito as the slithering personification of sleazy romance, wearing an evening gown under his suit coat because as a poor boy in Cuba he thought all rich people wore them. Kupper's Peach as a whirling top of deluded charm who can never obtain the thing he desires. And Ana Reisman's Joanne, one of Bert's streetwise friends, as a sassy parody of a working-class girl who tells outlandish stories so people will notice her.

Stitching it all together is Blanchard's dead-porn-star, Marilyn-Monroe-like angel, in gray evening gown and platinum hair, cheerfully narrating the grisly details while sweeping across the stage and occasionally breaking into song. Life is a painful mess, she reminds us sweetly, and death is the only release.

"Landscape of the Body"

When: 8 p.m.
Thursdays-Saturdays,
2 p.m. Sundays
through April 5

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

Tickets: \$12-\$28
www.ticketbarrio.com
503-242-0080

Web site:
www.profiletheatre.org