

Mirror on Middle America

"Tales of the Lost Formicans" takes an outsider's view

By **HOLLY JOHNSON**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

A family falls apart despite one woman's efforts to salvage it. Meanwhile, aliens in matching sunglasses look on, chronicling the earthlings' activities with the precision of anthropologists.

In Constance Congdon's "Tales of the Lost Formicans," performed by the Profile Theatre Project, elements of "South Park," "King Lear" and Monty Python's Flying Circus, among others, brew together in a series of disjointed short scenes that pack an emotional wallop.

This quirky guide to Middle America aims to shock us and make us laugh, even as it holds a dark glass up to our society.

Founded by Jane Unger, Profile Theatre Project each season presents works of one playwright, following the practice of the Signature Theater in New York.

The works of Arthur Kopit launched the group's first season, and the playwright came to town to see a production and even rewrote parts of one of his old plays.

Last year, Tennessee Williams was the focus, as the homeless company struggled to find a space. And in this third season, the plays of Constance Congdon will take the stage.

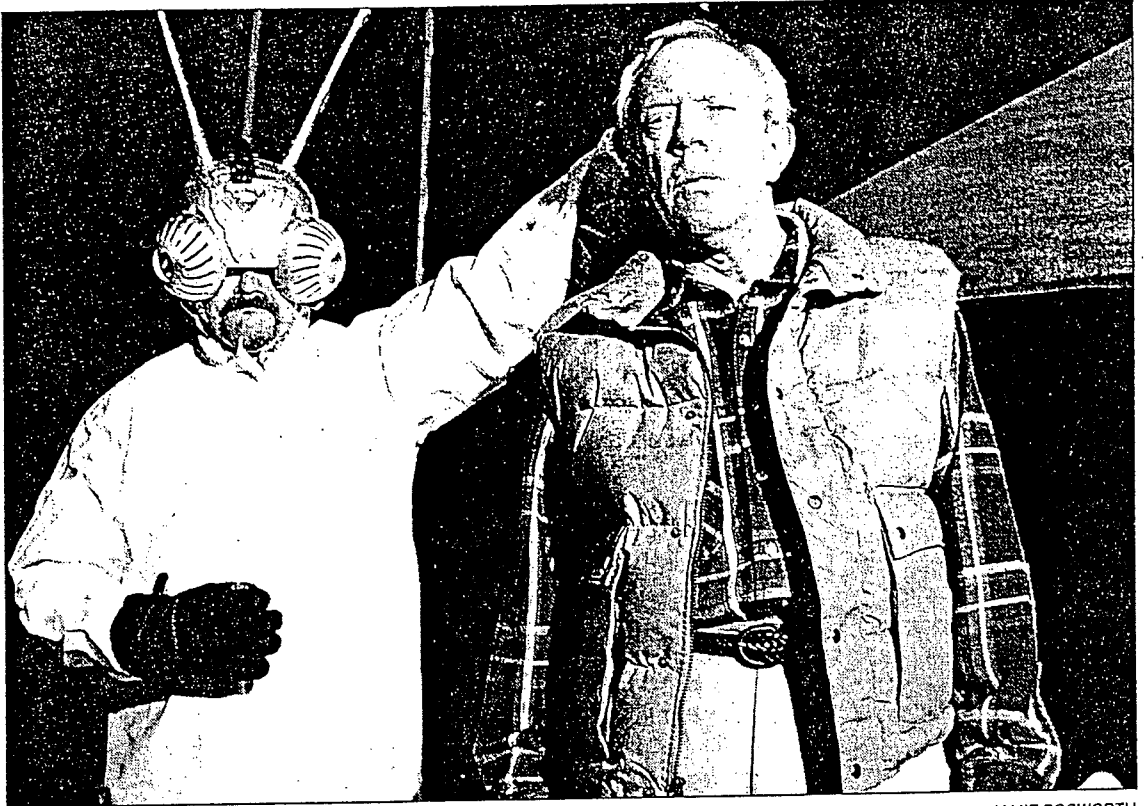
A prize-winning playwright who has had her works produced at the Actors Theater in Louisville, Congdon teaches playwriting and dramatic literature at Amherst College and is playwright-in-residence there and at the Hartford Stage Company.

She will be in Portland sometime during the season to offer a two-day playwriting workshop for adults and a writing workshop for high-school students.

Why Congdon? Why now? Her work perfectly suits the millennium, says Unger, a New Yorker who moved to Portland 11 years ago.

"Her plays really help us to take a step back and approach our culture with some perspective," says the artistic director during an interview in her Southwest Portland home.

The alien device in "Formicans," she adds, creates an objectivity that allows us to stand back and study these floundering suburban Americans with more humor and less pain.



JAMIE BOSWORTH

Alien academics: Randy Patterson (left) and Tobias Andersen star in "Tales of the Lost Formicans," Constance Congdon's satire about the efforts of aliens to figure out American culture.

"I was very drawn to Thornton Wilder, especially 'Our Town,' which is set in 1901 and has a speech about what people will think 100 years from now," Unger said. "And I found a very similar speech in 'Tales of the Lost Formicans,' a monologue about the rapid, rapid changes in our culture from pre-World War II to now."

A central character, Jim (played by Tobias Andersen), is "a carpenter... and he talks about how things are prefab now as opposed to the craftsmanship that went into building homes before the war."

He infers that maybe in another 100 years the prefab walls won't look so bad, and that time adds perspective.

"The things the playwright examines are things that are really pulling our society apart, and that need attention. There are very grim moments, and there are hilarious moments," says Unger, who calls the "Formicans" story line "as opposite to linear as is possible."

Nancy Klementowski, a Portland playwright, served as a dramaturg intern at Actors Theatre in 1989 when Congdon's play was staged there.

"She's a very unique writer with a different take on the world," Klementowski says. "She's not taking extraordinary subjects here: She's taking very simple subjects and figuring out a way to have people listen — and want to listen — to what

she has to say."

Congdon's other plays of the 1999-00 season also hold a mirror up to millennial concerns, signposts in our history.

"Lips," a social satire that opened in New York last spring and will have its West Coast premiere with Profile, deals with the first woman president and how she takes on the Christian Right.

Unger also will direct the one-act "No Mercy," which examines cultural effects of the atomic bomb. Its companion piece, "One Day Earlier," recently completed by the playwright, will be premiered in Portland.

On the phone from Amherst, Mass., Congdon says "Formicans" was initially inspired by her father's death from Alzheimer's.

"I wrote the play very honestly: I didn't protect myself, and I didn't hide anything," said Congdon, 55, who grew up in tract housing developments in Kansas and Colorado.

"It's constructed like a poem," she adds, referring to the disjointed plot, which she compares with the quick scene changes of Shakespeare.

"Sometimes I think people will get bewildered by it, but if it's performed with emotional truth, there shouldn't be a problem. It was written with a lot of manic fun, but with a completely open heart."

COMING UP

"Tales of the Lost Formicans"

Company: Profile Theatre Project

When: Opens 8 p.m. Friday, continues 8 p.m. Thursdays-

Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays,

through Dec. 19

Where: Theater!

Theatrel, 3430

S.E. Belmont Ave.

Tickets: \$10-\$18,
503-242-0080