

***Clackamas*Review**

'Ballyhoo' entertains and educates

The play looks at a Jewish family during holiday season and tackles discrimination

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Heather Ovalle, as Lala Levy, left, tries to get her point across to her uncle Adolph Freitag, played by Ernie Casciato, and her cousin Sunny Freitag, played by Jayne Stevens, in the play "Last Night of Ballyhoo."

Although Heather Ovalle's family is Jewish on both sides, she "grew up celebrating Christmas," and only in the last three years has the family come to fully embrace the Jewish faith.

So she was able to make a genuine connection to Lala Levy, the character she plays in Clackamas Repertory Theatre's upcoming production of "The Last Night of Ballyhoo."

"When I read the script, I cried, because my family is exactly like [Lala's family]," she said, adding that the recent celebration of her Jewish faith has been "a beautiful thing for me."

"The Last Night of Ballyhoo" takes place in Atlanta, Ga., in 1939, just before the movie "Gone With The Wind" is to be released. "The whole city has gone wild" with anticipation, said CRT Artistic Director David Smith-English, while Ovalle noted that her character has become "obsessed" with the movie and "wants to be Scarlet."

At the same time, the Levy family is setting up a Christmas tree and preparing for the Ballyhoo, an annual dance for the Jewish community that always occurs at this time.

The family "has tried to assimilate into the [Southern] Christian culture," but for the first time Uncle Adolph Freitag introduces his assistant into the family gathering, and the young man from Brooklyn "brings a lot of Jewishness that the family is not used to," Smith-English said.

Joe is an eligible bachelor and there are two young single women in the Levy family, both with mothers who are seeking husbands for their offspring — so tension ensues, he said.

“He is a catalyst who causes the family to face and embrace their Jewish past,” Smith-English added.

Love story

Lala Levy’s cousin, Sunny Freitag, falls in love with Joe, and that is the central romance of the play, said Jayne Stevens, who plays Sunny.

“[Joe] is not the Southern gentleman she thought she’d have to marry some day. She is overcome with emotion and her heart starts to take over — she’s never felt those feelings before,” Stevens said.

Sunny agrees to go to Ballyhoo with Joe, even though her family looks down upon the young man because he is from an Eastern European Jewish family, while she is descended from German Jews.

Meanwhile, Boo Levy, Lala’s mother, is trying to find a suitable date to the dance for her own daughter.

“Boo is the bully — the most blatant antagonist in the show, but David was wise in directing me to find her complexities. She can appear to be just angry, bitter and bossy, but [we worked together] to find her humanity,” said Tori Padellford, a Portland actress who is making her first appearance with CRT.

“The burden of Southern society has been huge and [Boo] is invested in her only child making a good match and is also looking out for her own future,” Padellford said.

At the same time, she added, the play reveals “the anti-Semitism within the Jewish community from a family that is deeply assimilated into Southern culture. [The playwright] points out that any kind of discrimination is not OK, but we convince ourselves it is.”

Humor and complexity

Smith-English is hoping the issues in the play intrigue the audience and draw them in to explore “the complexities of our humanity” when people are “faced with things they are forced to deal with.” All the characters are so interesting, he noted, and audiences will “love the humor in this wonderful, touching and warm” play.

Both Ovalle and Stevens feel that audiences will have no trouble relating to the story of a Southern Jewish family, set in the time of a world on the brink of World War II.

“It is written so beautifully — the dialogue is fabulous and [the story] really moves you,” Stevens said.

Ovalle added, “There are so many stories in [the play]. Hitler is invading Poland, there is a romantic relationship and then there is this weird adult family. What is the reason they are still together? On that level, there is something that everybody can relate to — even people with no knowledge of Jewish life.”

Fast Facts

- Clackamas Repertory Theatre presents “The Last Night of Ballyhoo,” the 1997 Tony Award-winning play by Alfred Uhry, author of “Driving Miss Daisy.”
- CCC history professor Jackie W. Flowers, Ph.D., will present a talk entitled “Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor: On Being Jewish in America, 1939,” every night after the play.
- The play previews Thursday, Sept.24, opens Friday, Sept. 25 and continues through Oct.11, Thursday through Sunday. Evening performances Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays begin at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday matinees are at 2:30 p.m.
- This is the first time “Ballyhoo” has been presented professionally in the Portland area. The play also won the 1997 Outer Critic’s Circle Award for best play and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.
- Regular tickets are \$12 to \$22. Preview tickets for the Sept. 24 performance are \$10 to \$15. For tickets, visit www.clackamasrep.org or phone 503-657-6958, ext. 5351.