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Theater review: 'Taking Steps' is laugh out-loud British farce with wardrobe malfunctions

by Colin Mannex, Special to The Oregonian

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[Clackamas Repertory Theatre's](#) production of "[Taking Steps](#)" by [Alan Ayckbourn](#) treads through some predictable comic territory -- light British farce in the vein of Noel Coward or Peter Shaffer's "Black Comedy"-- and delivers some rather unexpected delights.

With a simple premise and stock characters, the play's humor depends almost entirely on the unusual architecture of a gloomy old house that a beefy, hard-drinking entrepreneur, Roland, (Todd Van Voris) wants to buy for his wife, Elizabeth (Amanda Jensen). He doesn't know that she's planning on abandoning him, and the house itself proves the greatest physical obstacle for her -- or anyone for that matter -- to leave.

As with most great melodramas, the characters gather in Roland's miserable new home to seek shelter from a storm. They enter one by one -- the landlord Leslie, the solicitor Tristram (Jayson Shanafelt), Elizabeth's brother Mark (Alexander Fox), and Mark's estranged girlfriend Kitty (Annie Rimmer) -- and no one knows exactly whether they're alone when they arrive.

The actors have honed their characters for big laughs on first sight. Their deliberately hideous late '70s attire reveals the era's most wincing fashion mistakes. And the outfits exacerbate their behavioral tics: Leslie motorbikes to the big house in black leather that fits him like a sausage casing; Tristram suffers from a terrible stammer and polyester sweater combination; and Kitty looks downright mangy as a London punk girl with ripped fishnets, cropped hair, and hand-sewn patches on her jacket. Her recent arrest for "soliciting" certainly doesn't help, either.

Of the remaining characters, siblings Mark and Elizabeth have been spared the worst wardrobe malfeasances, probably because the play centers on their honest attempts to find love or freedom, or whatever. With no insult to Ayckbourn, the plot doesn't really support the madcap action. When Mark points his finger at Tristram and says, "I suspect if one examined it in detail, that story wouldn't hang together for a second," his incredulity might well extend to the entire play. But that's half the fun of it.

Director Slayden Scott Yarbrough has found maximum comic potential in the given circumstances. Like Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors," this farce has only one true joke, and the entire cast plays it dependably through every possible variation. Their comic business develops as Elizabeth and Kitty try to escape from Roland's decrepit mansion that features three floors but only one central staircase. Over the course of an evening and through the subsequent morning, the ensemble cast breaks into unlikely clusters as they move from room to room, "taking steps" to alternately avoid or discover a lover, lawyer, or landlord.

Scenic designer Christopher D. Whitten accomplishes the architectural gimmick by squashing the house's various levels so that each floor occupies a different quadrant that's accessible only by way of the circular stairwell at center stage. Racing up and down these imaginary steps, the actors whirl through the play with enough momentum to keep things lively through the two-hour run.

Sometimes, however, the actors' vocal work fails to match the precision they've achieved with their physical comedy. Amanda Jensen's British accent wavers throughout play, and Jayson Shanafelt has not quite mastered his character's inarticulate stuttering for comic rhythm and pace.

But these are minor points. The actors work ably together, and Todd Van Voris offers a truly exceptional performance as the bucket manufacturer Roland. Showing perfect timing, he catches each supporting character in moments of brilliance that fall together and accumulate like drops in a pail.

Taking Steps

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, through July 26

Where: Clackamas Community College, 19600 S. Molalla Ave. Oregon City

Tickets: \$12-\$22, 503-657-6958, ext. 5151 or [online](#)

Web site: clackamasrep.org