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Review: Clackamas' 'Forum' comes complete with '60s flashbacks

by Holly Johnson, Special to The Oregonian
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Everything about "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," currently in performance at the Clackamas Repertory Theatre on the Clackamas Community College campus, reflects the 1960s. A Latin beat fills some of the Stephen Sondheim songs, we've got quick one-liners a la Neil Simon, the women are either sex objects or battleaxes, and minimalist slanted house fronts of ancient Rome look as though they were sketched by television cartoon artists popular in that decade.

In fact, the entire Tony-winning 1962 musical with book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, has the feel of a cartoon, particularly in the Clackamas production directed by Ernie Casciato. Soldiers mince and prance across the stage like animals from a "Road Runner" cartoon (they even imitate dogs at one point). Characters display distinctive ways of walking: They swagger, shuffle, undulate, or skip like children.

Based on figures and incidents from the works of ancient Roman comic playwright Plautus, the show's strength lies in its farcical plot rich with quick exits and entrances, mistaken identities, and dead bodies that can't lie still. Casciato's cast lights up the stage, led by central character Michael Mitchell as the cunning slave Psuedolus (Zero Mostel's role on Broadway), who is quick of limb and even quicker of wit.

His goal to become a free man may be accomplished if he can get the lovers Philia (played with relentless cheer by Kaiti Christine Davis) and her smitten suitor Hero (Nick Jones) together. The problem is that the overbearing Roman officer Miles Gloriosus (Nathan Dunkin, with his peacock headdress) is coming to claim Philia as a pre-purchased bride. To save her for Hero, Psuedolus must find a female substitute in the eunuch Hysterium.

Fine seasoned actors in cameo roles make the production delightful: Tobias Andersen is hilarious as Marcus Lycus, the keeper of a brothel, who moves surprisingly fast for an old codger, and joins in the final choruses of "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid" with panache; K.B. Mercer as the nagging wife Domina commands the stage, and is nightmarish in ghostly makeup, perhaps a bit too creepily turned out for this light-hearted show. Doren Elias creates a brittle, beaten figure in Senex, the henpecked husband who longs for a last fling with Philia. A younger cast member, James

Sharinghousen, keeps the comic timing sharp as Hysterium, who finds himself in the center of the farcical cyclone in the last act. Although the musical quality isn't always at its best technically, the voices are fine for the show, and the colorful cartoon-like set by Christopher D. Whitten is a winner. Vibrant, quirky costumes by Alva Bradford complement the set.