

Theater review: 'Last Night of Ballyhoo' takes on loyalty and prejudice

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Ballyhoo is a big-deal dance in Atlanta that draws wealthy young Jews from across the South like social butterflies to a flame - as one character sardonically puts it, "a lot of dressed-up Jews dancing around wishing they could kiss their elbows and turn into Episcopalians."

The year is 1939. Hitler is lurking on the front pages of the Atlanta Constitution. The world premiere of "Gone with the Wind" at Loew's Grand Theatre downtown has the city in a tizzy. And Boo Levy is worried that if someone doesn't invite her flighty daughter, Lala, to Ballyhoo quick, the girl will end up an eccentric old maid.

"The Last Night of Ballyhoo," which is getting a crisp, pleasingly modulated performance at Clackamas Repertory Theatre, is by Alfred Uhry, author of "Driving Miss Daisy," and although it's a bigger family comedy (or "dramedy," if you prefer) it plays with similar issues of loyalty and prejudice.

In this case, wealthy German Jews are jealous of their social standing and fearful of being tainted by "the other kind" - the later waves of usually poorer Eastern European Jewish immigrants. These fiercely status-driven achievers have their roots sunk deeply into the soil of the South, and the South's assumptions of hierarchy and ethnic order are intensely important to them. They're "Jew-haters," as the puzzled newcomer from Brooklyn baldly accuses them, and in a sense he's right.

"Ballyhoo" won the Tony Award for best play after its New York opening in 1997 (it premiered the previous year at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta) and at that point it already felt old-fashioned - not irrelevant in the least, but as comfortable in the old stage verities of drawing-room comedy and drama as its characters are trying to be in the social traditions of the old South.

That's part of what makes the play work. A firebrand assault would destroy this material and these characters. The odd twists of custom and prejudice burrow into these seven interlinked characters in offhand and often almost imperceptible ways, and it's sometimes a race whether the audience or the characters notice their effects first. Uhry plays his hand delicately, letting the issues drift in softly like a light snowfall, and director David Smith-English's production follows suit.

"The Last Night of Ballyhoo"

When:

Various dates, times through Oct. 11

Where: Clackamas Repertory Theatre, 19600 S. Molalla Ave., Oregon City

Tickets: \$12-\$22; 503-657-6958, ext. 5351

Web site: www2.clackamas.edu/crt/index.asp

If you want comfortable, old pro Ernie Casciato is about as comfortable as you can get as the avuncular family patriarch and source of wealth, Adolf Freitag. He wanders around the house mumbling small frustrations and dispensing small benedictions - an oddly Christian way of phrasing it, but remember, these people think like Episcopalians. I can imagine a tougher, more aggressive Adolf - after all, the man's a lion of the Southern Jewish upper crust - but Casciato's warmth is what holds this odd baggage of a household together.

In a way the play's most compelling character is Adolf's widowed sister Boo, played with fierce bossy frustration by Tori Padellford. Boo's a number: angry, driven, frustrated, intensely aware of her teetering position on the social ladder, bitter about having to play a supporting instead of a leading role. In this play about Southern prejudice, black people are hardly mentioned: The one black member of the household, a cherished and competent cook/maid, has left in a fury before the play begins because Boo has hinted she stole some loose change. Boo could be a monster, and she partly is, but Padellford subtly shows us how she got that way. It hurts to be Boo.

Good support comes from Cyndy Smith-English as the sweetly addled sister-in-law Reba, Heather Ovalle as eagerly untethered Lala, Jayne Stevens as the bright niece Sunny and Robert Alzman as the comically appalling blue-blood catch of the day, Peachy Weil. Jayson Shanafelt is a standout as Joe Farkas, the new blood in town and the conscience of the play. As Joe brings a spark of possibility and a shot of vitality to the whole clan, Shanafelt brings welcome nuance to a role that could be as forbidding as a tongue-lashing from the prophet Jeremiah.

Contributing greatly to this production's sense of old-fashioned theatrical virtue are the handsome set and lighting by another solid old pro, Christopher D. Whitten, and the softly proper costumes by Alva Bradford. Whitten and Bradford let you know exactly where you are and make you like being there - if only for a visit.

-- *Bob Hicks, Special to The Oregonian*

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