Riding desire

Clark College doesn't shy from passion, violence in 'Streetcar'

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Clark College is staging a production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" that doesn't gloss over the violence and passion that bind the play's trio of characters, Blanche (Heidi K. Hunter), Stanley (David Hutchinson) and Stella (Jenny Stirling).

Two steer 'Streetcar' into spring

Clark College, Artists Repertory Theatre each to present version

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
for The Columbian

Before picking this season's plays, Clark College theater director Dan Anderson met with professor Lisa Abbott to brainstorm ways to avoid the "Proof" good of two years ago. That was when the college and another local company produced the same play within blocks of each other at the same time. Anderson and Abbott reviewed what they knew was being planned by other troupes. They figured what standard fare might be due to reappear, and they tried to pick unusual pieces that would be hits. "The Underpants," by Steve Martin; "Jesus Christ Superstar," by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice; and "A Streetcar Named Desire," by Tennessee Williams. Williams won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1948 for his piece, but it hadn't been performed locally — at least locally in at least two decades. Yet soon after Clark College published its season, Anderson learned that the area's second-largest professional theater company, Artists Repertory Theatre, also planned a version of the show during an overlapping run. The coincidences became more statistically staggering as the largest professional company in the area, Portland Center Stage, announced it would mount a version of "The Underpants" at the same time as Clark and a Broadway tour of "Jesus Christ Superstar" booked its run through the area, once again right when Clark was producing its show. "It's a very weird stroke of luck," Anderson acknowledged. Not necessarily bad, though. Two community theater companies producing the same work in this county at the same time, he said, is something that happens with "Proof," typically doesn't bode well for either. But when professionals in Portland coincide with Clark, which hasn't happened often, the results have been surprisingly positive for the college.

Anderson said this counter-intuitive concept first clicked with him when the Broadway tour of "Evita" announced it would come through Portland in the mid-1990s at the same time as Clark's presentation. He imagined the worst. He thought it would decimate his audiences. Instead, the heavy advertising by the Broadway troupe seemed to create a boost of interest that filled Clark's seats. This season only adds evidence that such coincidence boosts Clark's audiences.

Clark College has had a record-setting year, Anderson said, selling out almost every performance. "Maybe ours looks like a better..."
If you

**What:** Artists Repertory Theatre presents "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams.

**When:** Through May 10, with performances at 7:30 nightly, except Mondays, with shows at 2 p.m. Sundays.

**Where:** Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre, 1915 S.W. Alder St.

**Cost:** $20 to $47.

**Information:** 503-241-1078 or www.artistsrep.org

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**STREETCAR**

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bargain," he said. "It's been one of the best seasons, if not the best season, we've ever had.

A Streetcar Named Desire," the final show for Clark before summer break, contrasts two of America's most iconic characters in Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski, memorably played in the 1951 movie by Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando.

Dubois, no longer the Southern belle of her youth, moves in to a cheap New Orleans apartment with her sister Stella, Kowalski's wife, bringing tragedy to the trio with her.

Clark College is taking some risks with its production of the play, which runs May 2-3 at the Decker Theatre. Clark's production will enact the emotional peaks of the piece, including physical fights and a rape, which typically take place off stage, said Abbott, the director.

"It's an extremely violent play. It's also a play about some really passionate relationships, and we're going to show that as well," Abbott said. "I'm not going to back away from the reality being presented. I'm not trying to make it comfortable for our audiences."\n
Artists Rep's approach, envisioned by director Jon Kretzu, is to stage the story as a series of flashes from the perspective of the institutionalized Blanche, basically starting where the play and film end and looking backward. Workers in the asylum become characters from her past.

Kretzu said he chose the concept to try to shed some of the story's iconic baggage, while giving fans of the play a way to see it fresh. Kretzu considers the piece one of the top five greatest American plays, particularly strong in its presentation of an author's poetic sensibility, apparent in other works such as "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "The Glass Menagerie."

"Williams writes like no one else," Kretzu said. "And this play is really the perfect balance of everything he ever set out to do." As for the undertaking Clark College production, which closes on the same weekend, May 17-18, Kretzu said that Artists Rep has had the same sort of situation developing several times with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Ore.

Parallel artistic efforts have worked to his group's advantage in the past as well, he said. "I hope it would create an interest (in Clark's audience) to see another production," he said. "The more the merrier."

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**VHS OR BETA**

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danceable, but the emphasis is clearly more on pop hooks than groove.

The shift in direction, Plunder acknowledged, was motivated not only by the group's attraction for pop music, but by a desire to readjust the musical identity of VHS or Beta so the group can continue to stop outside of expectations.

"We're trying to do things that allow us to be free as musicians to let always to feel like we have to play a certain type of music — within reason," Plunder said. "I don't think we're going to make like a country dance record."

In creating "Bring on the Comets" and redefining its sound, the group made a major change in its writing process.

On past records, songs began during jam sessions, and would get refined and would be a true collaboration by all involved. But bassist Mark Pauly and drummer Mark Gould stepped back for "Bring on the Comets," and let Plunder become the main songwriter.

"They invested a lot of faith and trust in me," Plunder said. "I think it was very noble of both of us to just do some of the control and let me go off on my own little world and write some songs for the band."

Part of the reason for the change was the departure of guitarist Zeke Buck, which changed the dynamic that had previously existed.

"When we got rid of Zeke, we started writing again as a three-piece and just felt uncomfortable because we had been so used to having two guitars in the room," Plunder said. He said his move into the role of chief songwriter evolved naturally as each band member began writing on his own.

As much as Plunder is proud of "Bring on the Comets," he said VHS or Beta is diversifying its live set after heavily emphasizing material from the current CD.

"We're adding songs from 'Le Fume' and more songs from 'Night as Fire' as well as 'Comets,'" Plunder said. "I think for some of our older fans, there was a little frustra- tion like, 'are you playing a lot of the new songs? ... So we're really looking forward to giving that back to them and introducing people who have just found out about us to a lot of our other material. Hopefully they'll like it all."