

A dramatic scene change 'Aquitania' kicks off Willamette theater season

By Barbara Curtin

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After a year of performing in "found spaces" — including a frigid warehouse off Highway 22 — Willamette University theater students and faculty are rejoicing in their newly renovated playhouse.

The \$5.6-million project has transformed the building's interior with modern sound and light systems, new classrooms and a black box theater with flexible seating. Workers are adding the finishing touches in preparation for the Oct. 8 opening of "Aquitania."

Jonathan Cole, theater department co-chairman, said the improvements will allow students to work with new, industry-standard equipment.

"We'll be training people to go out into the real world and work with the things they will be encountering in professional theater," he said.

Andrew Toney, the newly hired theater manager, said he wants to increase efforts to tell the wider community about theater events and to simplify the process of buying tickets.

A visible sign of that commitment is the theater's bright, welcoming lobby, with brick walls, maple flooring and black art-deco chairs and ottomans. It boasts a real ticket booth — a step up from the previous closet.

The improved playhouse will allow the university to host a filmmakers' institute and a workshop for advanced actors in summer 2011. Those programs are expected to draw about 60 participants, including some from other countries.

The design by Salem's Ar buckle Costic Architects pays tribute to the building's 1920s beginnings as a gym. Graceful archways of natural brick have been preserved throughout. The bathrooms boast white-tiled walls and black-and-white tile hexagons on the floors. In the basement design studio, painted numbers still show which arches to enter for seats in the old gymnasium. The dressing rooms are accented with old wire gym baskets, some still bearing



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Jonathan Cole, Willamette University theater department co-chairman, is reflected in a dressing room mirror at the university's playhouse.

Tickets

Cost: \$6 to \$8 for previews, \$8 to \$10 for matinees, \$8 to \$12 for evenings, \$15 to \$18 for opening night. Subscrip-tions range from \$20 to \$50 for four productions.

Information:
www.willamette.edu/arts/theatre/home.html

their owners' locks. "It's a balance between modern chic and the classic feel of the building," said Cole.

Enticing as those details are, the building's centerpiece is the 45-by-45-foot black box theater. Crews will be able to convert it from thrust stage to theater in the round or any configuration a director needs.

"We've gone from a very limited space to an incredibly flexible one," said Cole.

A "tension grid," or net, extends under the full ceiling. Crew members can walk across the springy net to safely adjust lights at waist level instead of crawling out on precarious catwalks. All these changes will make a difference to theater students such as Mimi d'Autremont, a sophomore from West Linn. Last fall, as assistant stage manager for "Antigone," she spent afternoons and nights at the Willamette Transfer Station, the warehouse that served as a temporary stage. As temperatures plunged to the 30s, she'd dress in hats, gloves, jackets and three pairs of sweat pants.

"It's a completely different world, working at the transfer station to here," said d'Autremont, who is stage manager for this fall's "Aquitania."

She agreed with Susan Coromel, associate chairwoman of the department, that there was value in learning to do theater under such primitive conditions. Still, the new building will better prepare her for a possible future in professional theater production. "It provides a lot of learning tools I didn't have in the past, to learn about all aspects of the technical side," she said.

Plus, theater students now have a common hangout, which helps build camaraderie.

For students and community members alike, the proof will come early next month, when the lights go down in the black box theater and the music of "Aquitania" begins.

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Willamette Theatre will open the 2010-11 season in its newly remodeled quarters with an Oregon premiere, "Aquitania."

"I was looking for a play that would be new and different, that would work for parents weekend and a grand opening and suit the students we have now," said Susan Coromel, the director. "I wanted something more magical, with comic elements, possibly music. I found all that in this play."

"Aquitania" was created by Ziggurat Theatre Ensemble in Los Angeles, a company that devises its own work. A comedy with song, it takes place in the mythical kingdom of Aquitania and is based on characters from "Legends of Charlemagne."

"It's a story about a woman looking to her childhood to relearn the lessons she learned as a child ... to save the world from barbarians," said Coromel. It features haunting songs, some in French, and a surrealistic set.

Previews will be Oct. 6 and 7; opening night is Oct. 8. The play runs at 7:30 p.m. each Thursday, Friday and Saturday through Oct. 16. Matinees are at 2 p.m. Oct. 10 and 16. (The theater's fliers list performances a week earlier, but these were canceled due to construction delays.)

Other performances for this season will be:

"Beckettshorts," short plays by Samuel Beckett, directed by Jonathan Cole; previews Nov. 11 and runs at 7:30 p.m. each Thursday, Friday and Saturday through Nov. 20. Matinees are scheduled for 2 p.m. Nov. 14 and 20.

"PeopleDance," in which Artistic Director Mathew Nelson presents a collection of faculty, student and guest artist choreography performed by WU dancers. Previews Feb. 17, 2011 and runs at 7:30 p.m. each Thursday, Friday and Saturday through Feb. 26. Matinees are scheduled for 2 p.m. Feb. 20 and 26.

"Death of a Salesman," Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning tragedy of the common man, with guest director Rod Ceballos, guest actor Mikel MacDonald as Willy Loman, Willamette acting professor Susan Coromel as Linda Loman and guest sound designer Cecil Averett. Previews April 14, 2011 and runs at 7:30 p.m. each Thursday, Friday and Saturday through April 30. Matinees are scheduled at 2 p.m. April 17, 24 and 30.