

Cold Comedy is one not snow

The actors and directors make for a special combination in the premieres of four one-acts

By **HOLLY JOHNSON**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"The Cold Comedy Concoction," the world premieres of four fresh one-act plays produced by Stark Raving Theatre, glitters and gleams onstage.

What holds the quartet together? The theme of cold and the use of two male and two female actors with balanced time onstage in each piece.

What makes them sparkle even brighter is that four different directors have a hand in shaping the final effect, and as we see the same actors transformed in each playlet, the understanding of how theater as illusion works comes into focus.

The idea, spearheaded by Stark Raving's artistic director, Matt Zrebski, has brought a lot of diverse talent together. The playlets by Portland writers William S. Gregory, Kelly Bartholemew and Todd Pozyski and New Yorker Stephen Karam frequently pluck humor and cleverness from language itself, and that's where the enchantment lies.

Also, oblique and direct references to current politics add delectable satire to this word-rich evening.

I can't wax rhapsodically enough about Gregory's "Empirical," the opening piece. Gregory's plays typically revel in language, and his Oscar Wilde-inspired metaphors and wry insights here dazzle us.

An obsessed English explorer finds himself on the ice-bound terrain of Antarctica, hoping to beat the Norwegians at claiming the land. ("Their entire language sounds like stuttering in aspic," he grumbles.) Instead, he comes across two unusually erudite creatures taking afternoon tea and talking most astutely, if not formally, on life, the display of good sense, the art of exploration, the nature of humans and even the careful definition of terms. ("Was that a tirade or a fusillade?" one wonders, after an outburst from the explorer.)

Gabriel Forrest's direction is clean and uncluttered, and Joe Bolenbaugh as the explorer exudes a fresh-faced innocence amid his greed for conquest. Chris Murray



SIOUXSIE SUAREZ

Actors Chris Murray (from left), Paige Jones, Joe Bolenbaugh and Saren Nofs-Snyder succeed in warming up the audience in "The Cold Comedy Concoction," a collection of four one-act plays.

THEATER REVIEW

The Cold Comedy Concoction

Company: Stark Raving Theatre

Where: CoHo Theatre, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St.

Continues: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 22

Tickets: \$10-\$18, pay-what-you-can Thursdays, 503-232-7072

On the Net: www.starkravingtheatre.org

as his Cockney crewman brings a cold blast of reality to a very odd experience on ice.

In Bartholemew's "Mixed Messages," three bickering teens stranded on a wintry road run into Glacierella, a magical woman (the talented Paige Jones in luminescent finery) who is tired of their conflicts and wants to teach them a lesson. The playwright is a senior in high school, and she's got her characters pegged without stereotyping them.

There's a lovely symmetry to the outcome, where love — or at least

infatuation — saves the day.

In "The Principal and the Pee," playwright Karam sends us on a roller-coaster ride fueled by language, albeit misused and much-abused language: sentences that trail off into hilarious helplessness; attention-deficit disorder at full tilt.

A principal takes over a school as if it were a kingdom in this absurdist theater piece reminiscent of Christopher Durang and Eugene Ionesco.

In Pozyski's "Spud Toppers," the corporate world runs amok with

crazies, including Saren Nofs-Snyder as a neurotic administrator who applies more makeup when things get stressful.

The effusive full house on opening night, Christmas, apparently loved the show.

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