

Coloradoan

Estimated printed pages: 3

August 20, 2005

Section: Life

Page: B8, B7

Groundlings founder hits the mark with premiere performance of 'Oil'

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It's an interesting feeling to laugh at something sad.

Like when a Halliburton employee-held-hostage is released to find his paycheck has been withheld for the time he was gone, and his failure to report to work resulted in a disciplinary note in his file.

But making you laugh at the absurd sadness of life is how Groundlings founder Gary Austin shows he is the satire master.

In his one-man-show "Oil," Austin takes the audience on a wild ride through the oil camps of Texas, where he grew up just 20 miles from G.W., to the Oilton, Okla., home of the Petroleum Hall of Fame.

In addition to Austin's own experiences, the show focuses on his research into the politics and environmental impact of the oil industry.

In a span of seconds Austin transforms into various characters including himself as a child, an oil tycoon and even his own father, who worked for Halliburton all of his life and, as he would often exclaim, "Criminoodles!" defended the company till the bitter end.

And whether he's scratching the side of his nose portraying his father or slapping the suddenly paunched-out gut of an Oilton newspaper editor, Austin deftly slides into the different characters from one second to the next.

But Austin knows how to satirize without being vengeful or derogatory, and when he mimics people, specifically his parents, he does so lovingly. Austin leaves it to the audience to decide whether to laugh or cry or do both.

That's not to say Austin doesn't have an angle. His viewpoint is clear right from the get-go as he notes "Americans equate cheap gas with democracy."

"Oil" is not a G.W. Bush rally, but it also doesn't burn him at the stake - maybe just singes him around the edges a little.

The show is short, a little longer than an hour, but audiences will walk out feeling like they got more than their money's worth. "Oil" definitely is a show that educates and entertains equally well.

Austin uses humor and silly songs like "Chicken Fried Steak" and "Cost Plus" like sugar water to make the jagged pills of information go down with a chuckle rather than a gag.

And thankfully there were plenty of laughs going around. Austin's children's story "W Succeeds in the Sandbox" left me in tears from laughing so hard.

That laughter especially helped when he dove into Executive Order 13303. As his father, Austin explains the validity of the order, which basically negates any responsibility on the part of the oil companies if and when their workers are injured on the

job in Iraq. As Austin so eloquently put it, "Halliburton must be protected from its own people."

Criminoodles.

Interested?

Gary Austin's "Oil"

When: The show runs today, Sunday, Thursday, Friday, Aug. 27, 28 and Sept. 1, 2 and 3. Thursday through Saturday performances begin at 7:30 pm and Sunday matinees at 2:30 pm.

Where: Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St.

Cost: \$19 for adults, \$15 for seniors (65 and older) and \$10 for students.

Workshops: Acting/Improv, Auditions/Cold Reading, Brain Games, Monologues Scenes and Characters, Solo Exploration "48 Street Exercise"), and "Harold Ensemble Workshop." There are no prerequisites. The workshops range in price from \$60 to \$100. Information: www.basbleu.org/gary_austin.html or 498-8949 for details. Students attending at least four workshops will receive a discount of \$10 per class.

Information and tickets: www.basbleu.org or 498-8949

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