

Profile Theatre focuses on Sam Shepard's dark plays for 2014 season, kicking off with 'Eyes for Consuela'

By Jamie Hale for the Oregonian
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Profile Theatre is kicking off a season of Sam Shepard's dark work with "Eyes For Consuela" this weekend. (David Kinder/Profile Theatre)

Isolation. Self-exploration. Acceptance. Family. Love. Expect to see all of the above during Profile Theatre's 2014 season, which focuses on prolific American playwright Sam Shepard.

Profile artistic director Adrianna Baer says the selection of Shepard was a no-brainer for the company, which builds each season around the work of a single writer.

"The language he uses to place his characters in geographic space really resonates well with us in the Pacific Northwest," Baer says. "He writes very much in the way that is in touch with the earth and in the environment."

Shepard, who earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for "Buried Child," is also known for his dark, often horrific, portrayal of American life. His style has created a fervent following, as well as a fair share of detractors. Some Profile supporters were concerned about presenting an entire season of his work, but Baer shrugged it off. "I'm willing to take a risk to share that with my patrons because I believe in Sam's writing and I believe in the power of his language," she says.

Still, she didn't want to start off with a piece as heavy as "Buried Child" (which will be the second show of the season). Instead the theater will ease audiences into his work with "Eyes For Consuela," which follows an American man as he leaves the country, seeking a life-affirming adventure south of the border.

The 1999 play focuses on distress, violence and anger -- not foreign themes for Shepard. Henry, the main character, trades his predictable life in Michigan for the unexpected in a remote part of Mexico. An ominous one-eyed innkeeper warns him not to wander, but the desperate American traipses through the jungle anyway, running into a terrifying local who threatens to cut out Henry's eyes.

Henry's journey leads him down a treacherous road that allows him to see that, hey, maybe things weren't so bad after all, Baer points out. It reinforces the notion of the silver lining, but it does so through a violent lens.

"Consuela," like most of Shepard's work, delivers a very real emotional lesson, with a message that can be hard to swallow — call it tough love. None of us are immune to weakness and fear, and many of us have fallen to great depths to find our true selves, but we don't often like addressing that darker side of self-exploration.

"Yes there's a bit of violence, yes there's a bit of anger, but I also think there's a lot of beauty and a lot of heart in this play," Baer says.

Profile's season will end with another stark work by Shepard, "Kicking a Dead Horse." The one-man show highlights the tribulations of a man whose horse dies in the middle of the desert (the stage notes request a real dead horse, if possible). Shepard uses dark humor to once again underscore the search for purpose as he pushes his character to the brink of insanity.

The Shepard series is the first in Profile's new home at the Artists Repertory Theatre. Both the stage size and number of seats has grown, as has the company's budget.

Some worries about filling all those seats might be unfounded -- opening night is already sold out. And Baer thinks the themes of Shepard's plays will find a welcome home in Portland, hopefully making the 2014 season Profile's most successful to date.

"What you have is a writer who is really relevant across many generations of Americans," she said. "And he's just a great badass kind of person."