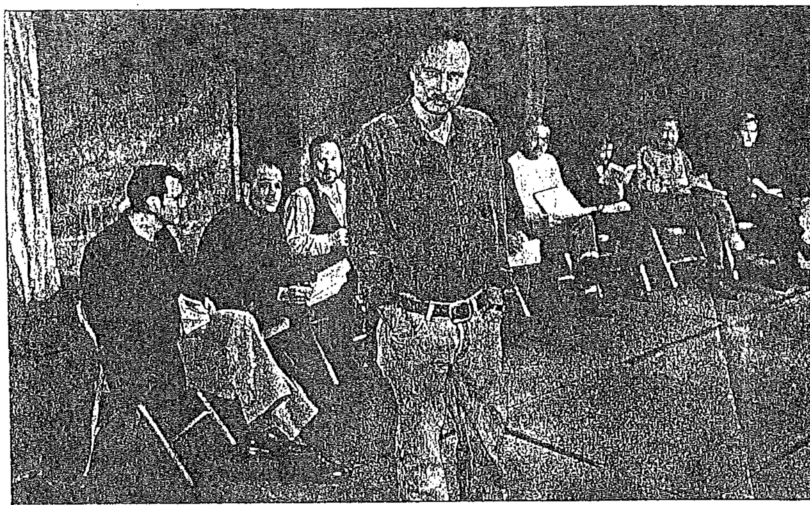

TOM TREICK/The Oregonian

Playwright Arthur Kopit (center) stands in front of the cast for a staged reading of his play "Indians."

Winging it with Arthur Kopit

The playwright gets a season all his own and pronounces himself a happy man

By BARRY JOHNSON
of The Oregonian staff

Arthur Kopit, tall and lanky, ambled up to Jane Unger, the artistic director of the Profile Theatre Project, right after the conclusion of his play "Wings."

He looked happy, and he immediately began to extol the virtues of actor Gaynor Sterchi, the star of the show, and of the staging as a whole.

That sort of validation was important for a few good reasons. For starters, Kopit is considered one of the best living American playwrights, a keen satirist with an experimental bent. And Unger has dedicated her theater's first season to three plays by Kopit. She's following this production of "Wings" with "Road to Nirvana" and "Indians."

Finally, she had brought the playwright to town to see the opening and to talk to students and the public at various forums around Portland. It simply wouldn't do to have a grumpy playwright complaining all over town about the way his play was treated.

The next day, Kopit was still happy. After watching a staged reading of "Indians" at the same theater, he was practically beaming with enthusiasm and energy.

"Here's what I did this morning," he said, holding up a copy of the script for "Wings." A number of cuts and rearrangements were indicated in the margins, made in pencil with a neat hand.

"Because Gaynor was so good and the production was so good, I was able to see some things I could tighten," he said. And in the course of a conversation lasting more than an hour he referred several times to Sterchi's brilliance and subtlety as an actor.

"Wings" is a difficult script both for the actor who plays its central character,

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Kopit: 'Here's a white guy who knows his history'

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Emily Stilson, and for the audience. "It stretches the limit of the audience's attention," as Kopit said.

The reason is that Emily has suffered a stroke, and Kopit attempts to describe the world from her point of view. The play mixes Emily's interior struggle to make sense of what has happened to her with her exterior interactions with the medical staff that is treating her. It can be confusing, especially since the stroke has affected her ability to use language correctly.

Kopit also wanted "Wings" to be nonlinear and unpredictable. He didn't want Emily's experience to have a coherence it shouldn't have. But he also didn't want to make the audience's job impossible. Seeing the Profile Theatre Project show, Kopit suddenly saw a way to help the audience by cutting and moving a few small pieces of the script.

"I'm far enough away from the play that it was important to tighten it," he said. Kopit estimated that the cuts might shorten the play by five minutes.

What makes Sterchi's performance so good is her ability to reflect the rapid changes that Emily is undergoing. She swiftly passes through raw fear, paranoia, confusion, depression, a spunky determination to recover and even elation, during her memories of her days as a stunt aviator. Kopit said that Sterchi has an "amazing sense of Emily's colors."

Sterchi also conveys a sense of Emily's character before the stroke — adventurous, witty, courageous, even tough. "The premise I used was that somewhere inside a person who is undergoing a stroke is an intact person. Part of the person is in there," Kopit explained.

As the play moves along, Emily gradually begins to get better, becoming more adept at connecting language with events and objects. She understands that she has a problem, that what she says doesn't always make sense to the people around her.

Kopit recalled sitting in on a group therapy session with stroke patients while he was researching "Wings," which was inspired by his father's stroke. One man was asked what season it was. Realizing from the response of those around them that he had said the wrong word, even though he knew perfectly well the right answer, he was bemused. "It's nuts, isn't it," Kopit remembered his saying.

There can be a certain humor in this, especially if the patient recognizes the seeming absurdity of it. Sterchi captures that, too, leavening a play that could seem simply tragic. "She got all the places where there is real humor," Kopit observed.

Kopit was appreciative of the attention Unger is giving his work. "Oh, it's wonderful," he said. "To my knowledge I have not had a season devoted to my work." He has had discussions with the Signature Theatre in New York City, a company that also devotes its seasons to a single playwright, but he is waiting until he has a new play for them to stage in addition to his older work.

"What are they going to make of it all," Kopit wondered about the audiences who would see his shows during the Profile season. "They are all so different. It's what museums do for artists all the time."

The staged reading of "Indians," with its large cast, went very well. The play, written as an oblique response to the Vietnam War, is about Buffalo Bill and his inner conflict at what happens to the Native Americans he admires. It is complicated, and some stagings have been quite elaborate. Kopit's faith in the inherent theatricality of the basic story — without lots of Wild West frippery — was confirmed by the reading. And after the reading was over, he got a chance to hear a discussion among the Native Americans in the audience, including critic Suzan Harjo, about his use of the Sun Dance ceremony in the play.

In 1971, according to Ed Edmo, a local writer, a production of "Indians" at Portland State University was closed down after some Native American activists objected to it. Kopit now sees a problem with a part of the offending section and hopes to address it. He took some comfort from Harjo, who regularly participates in the sacred ceremony. She defended Kopit's text. "Here's a white guy who knows his history," she said.

The controversy is indicative of Kopit's willingness to take on difficult subjects and treat them in radical ways.

Kopit's most recent project is dangerous in a different way: He's working on a rewrite of a certifiable American classic. It's an updating of Cole Porter's musical adaptation of Philip Barry's "The Philadelphia Story," which was made into the film musical "High Society." Kopit rewrote the musical and with collaborators Susan Birkenhead and Christopher Renshaw sorted through the Porter songbook for new tunes.

The show opened in San Francisco, where it was well-received, and it moves to Broadway for previews beginning March 31 at the St. James Theater. The official opening is April 23.

Kopit said that approximately two-thirds of the dialogue in the show is new. "It's the same story, but perceived in a new way, an homage true to the period, but not slavish." Kopit wanted the musical to employ modern stagecraft and shorthand storytelling techniques. "I didn't want to violate it, but I wanted to make it seem it was written today," Kopit said.

That probably won't be a problem. Kopit's plays have a cunning originality to them. They seem to belong to the present moment, even older work such as "Wings," which he wrote in 1978. That's what makes "High Society," and the remaining shows in the Profile Theatre Project season, exciting prospects for theater fans.