

Taking the 'Road to Nirvana'

Arthur Kopit's slam against money and power will offend — but also amuse

By BARRY JOHNSON
of The Oregonian staff

From the beginning it must be understood that Arthur Kopit's "Road to Nirvana," which the Profile Theatre Project opened last Friday, is a play that many have found offensive.

Kopit, brilliantly parodying David Mamet, uses garden-variety four-letter words in profusion. One episode is breathtakingly scatological. There's some nudity. And the plot payoff involves mutilation.

Kopit was himself offended when he wrote "Road to Nirvana." The object of his anger was fellow playwright Mamet, who had cast rock star Madonna for a production of his "Speed-the-Flow," a satire about Hollywood deal-making. To Kopit this was the rankest hypocrisy — Mamet using Madonna's star power to bolster his own box office.

So Kopit wrote "Road to Nirvana," which has stretches of hilarious Mamet-like dialogue and a character named Nirvana, who is intended to parody Madonna.

But it's more than a simple case of back-at-you. "Road to Nirvana" is a scathing critique of good old-fashioned American greed in its New Age Hollywood guise, a play in which the hunger for money and power provides the only logic for its human relationships. And it's hilarious in an outrageous, absurd way.

The Profile Theatre Project production, directed by Jane Unger, is sharp and on target, a worthy successor to the company's first show, Kopit's "Wings." It moves along briskly; Tim Stapleton's set design transforms easily from a would-be mogul's patio into a rock star's Egyptian fantasy world; and the acting is appropriate to the task at hand — a little crazed at times without going totally over the top.

The beginning of the play is a reunion of two old pals, Al (Doug Baldwin) and Jerry (Russ Benton). Their partnership had ended badly



Jerry (Russ Benton, left) and Al (Doug Baldwin) scheme in "Road to Nirvana," Arthur Kopit's send-up of Hollywood, and fellow playwright David Mamet, now at Profile Theatre Project.

THEATER REVIEW

Road to Nirvana

COMPANY: Profile Theatre Project

WHERE: Main St. Theatre, 904 S.W. Main St.

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 7 and 10 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through April 12

TICKETS: \$16, discounts for students, seniors and families available (242-0080)

years before, but now suddenly Al needs Jerry's help in producing a movie. At least that's how it seems.

The movie is the story of Nirvana's life, but she has simply typed up "Moby Dick," substituting her name for Captain Ahab's and replacing the whale with, well, we can't go into it in a family newspaper. After several severe and grotesque tests,

Jerry proves his worthiness to help Al and his girlfriend, Lou (Jean Miller), with the producing chores.

Then they all go to meet Nirvana (Jamie Chatalas), where we begin to realize that Jerry has simply been a pawn in a larger, more elaborate game. What won't Jerry sacrifice to become a Master of the Hollywood Universe, after all?

Baldwin's understanding of Al is brilliant, combining smarminess with manic aggression. Baldwin also has mastered the wacky line of Socratic questioning that is Al's way of communicating, a perverse pseudo-logical chain of thought that Baldwin sells perfectly.

Benton's Jerry borrows a bit from Jim Carrey, but that's perfectly natural — Carrey could be brilliant in this role. It has just the right nasty edge for him, but it also has the right naiveté.

Lou is drugged out, but she has enough on the ball to help Nirvana, as a supplier of both the drugs and the myth she needs to keep going.

Miller keeps her mysterious. Chatalas makes a regal Nirvana (or Madonna), a woman who is smarter and tougher than she seems.

Although it has axes to grind, "Road to Nirvana" is never preachy. Kopit's play is subversive. He uses the rapid-fire dialogue of Mamet to keep the audience both in the moment and in the dark. We can laugh along with him for quite a while before things get edgy enough to prompt a realization that we are at Kopit's mercy. Worse, we are at the mercy of the savage logic at work here, at the greed at the heart of it all, a greed for "things that none of us ever even dared to dream of," as Jerry says.

That is an uncomfortable moment, even for those who haven't winced as Jerry has been "tested" by Al and Lou.

But then "Road to Nirvana" is an uncomfortable play, and the Profile Theatre Project makes it deliciously so.