

ENTERTAINMENT

'Lisbon Traviata' plays self out to tragic operatic end

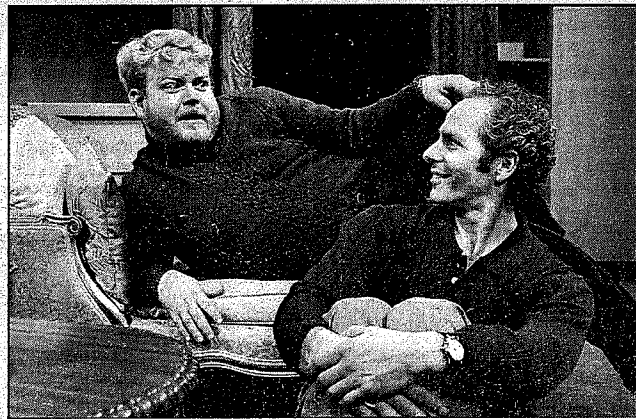
The four-man cast brings to life the vicissitudes and times of Terrence McNally's gay characters

By MICHAEL MCGREGOR
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Profile Theatre Project couldn't have made a better choice for the second show in its Terrence McNally season than "The Lisbon Traviata," a play both pivotal to the playwright's career and ideally suited to the group's small space.

The first of McNally's longer, richer plays, "Traviata" is filled with elements that have come to define his work: witty humor, desperate longing, a close examination of gay men's lives, and music. Lots of music, especially of the opera kind.

What makes Profile's choice especially fine is how convincingly director Jane Unger's four-man cast brings the characters' vicissitudes and times to life.



JAMIE BOSWORTH

Todd Van Voris (left) and Michael Mendelson trade banter on opera in "The Lisbon Traviata."

tudes and times to life.

Those times were not so long ago (the playbill sets the action in 1991, but the play was first produced in 1985, then revised and restaged in 1989) but in some ways they seem light years ago. AIDS

was still thought of as a gay men's scourge, and gay-themed theater for a mainstream audience was so fresh and self-aware that many gays were hypersensitive to perceived stereotyping.

Into these unsettled waters,

THEATER REVIEW

The Lisbon Traviata

Company: Profile Theatre Project

Where: Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St.

Continues: 8 p.m. Thursdays; Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 20

Tickets: \$12-\$25, 503-242-0080

McNally launched a play that centers on two self-critical gay men who escape the world through opera — particularly the singing of Maria Callas. Critics pounced, claiming that the play not only perpetuated stereotypes of gay men as self-hating "opera queens" but also that its two acts were too different to be in the same play.

Viewing the play two decades later, it is easy both to understand the critics' reaction and see what they missed. Act 1, indeed, plays

mostly as inspired farce, while Act 2 quickly turns tragic. But each has elements of the other in it, too. And while the characters do act stereotypically at times, they can't be reduced to types.

In Profile's production, Todd Van-Voris gives a wonderfully animated and flamboyant performance as the aging, overweight Mendy, who is obsessed with getting his hands on an LP of Callas singing "La Traviata" in 1958 in Lisbon.

Throughout Act 1, which takes place entirely in his apartment, Mendy camps and bickers playfully, mostly about opera and Callas, with Stephen (Michael Mendelson), a senior book editor who is fussier and more tightly strung.

Along the way, we learn that Stephen's live-in lover Mike (Andres Alcalá), a doctor, has brought a Columbia graduate student home for the night and asked Stephen to stay away. We learn, too, that while opera is a gentle obsession for Mendy, it is Stephen's way of looking at the world.

In the tragic second act, Stephen returns to his own apartment in the morning and confronts Mike after driving out Mike's new lover, Paul (Spencer Conway). The confrontation escalates to a tragic — and, of course, operatic — ending.

The acts rest uneasily together less because the tone shifts than because Mendy seems the center of the first and the less likable Stephen takes over in the second.

On opening night, Mendelson's initial difficulty settling into character made the transition even tougher. Once he hit his stride, however, his emotionally taut performance as an obsessed, increasingly unhinged, self-centered lover transformed the show.

Alcalá's performance as Mike is both finely calibrated and appropriately understated, and Conway is Adonis-like as Paul, which is mostly what the role requires.

Michael McGregor: clo: The Oregonian A&E, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201.