

New theater's reputation roars off on 'Wings'

By **BARRY JOHNSON**
of The Oregonian staff

Profile Theatre Project burst onto the Portland theater scene in a blaze of glory last weekend with a sharp, well-considered production of Arthur Kopit's "Wings."

At the center of the production, the company's first, Gaynor Sterchi gives one of those marvelous, breathtaking performances theater fans will be talking about for years.

For many this sublime performance will come as a surprise. Sterchi's work the past several years here, in such plays as "Lost in Yonkers" and "Hay Fever," has always been sharp and professional, but she hasn't had roles that really stretched her abilities. The character of Emily Stilson in "Wings" is a major-league challenge — devilishly difficult technically and just as hard emotionally. And she's at center stage for almost every second of the play — 90 minutes or so without intermission.

Sterchi takes command of this wonderful character, a former aviator and current stroke victim, and with director Jane Unger explores Emily with great insight, even profundity.

Kopit's play has the simplest of plots. Emily has a stroke in the opening scene and spends the rest of the play dealing with the strange things it does to her brain. She comes into contact with various doctors and nurses after the stroke. She's helped by a therapist, Amy (Jean Miller), once her recovery reaches a certain point. And she joins a group of patients with similar problems.

But the real "action" of the play, the real plot, occurs inside Emily's head. There, jagged shards of memory, perception and language collide, a kaleidoscope that never falls into complete, coherent patterns. Kopit attempts to track Emily's consciousness as she lurches through abject terror, jaunty confidence, total confusion and complete frustration.



Gaynor Sterchi (left) plays a recovering stroke victim aided by Jean Miller in "Wings" at the Profile Theatre Project.

Minute by minute, the audience never knows what state Emily will be in next. She's unpredictable, untethered to common sense, our shared conception of reality. Gradually, as Emily starts to restore her own mind, the audience begins to piece together something of her personal history, of the central experiences that define her.

Taking the audience on this safari into the interior of Emily's mind is a moment-by-moment process. Sterchi allows us to follow the quicksilver transformations that Kopit asks for with a rapid-fire series of expressions, postures and changes of voice quality. And she establishes Emily's essential character in the process —

her toughness, her dry sense of humor, her resilience and, ultimately, her wisdom.

The rest of the production serves Sterchi well. Kopit wants us to feel just how scary and disorienting a hospital can be for a patient, especially one with neurological problems. The sound of a floor polisher can be terrifying; the comings and goings of personnel seem completely random; the combination of sensory data from outside and inside the hospital is confusing.

Tim Stapleton's striking designs — the long diagonal wires with their curtains of transparent white material, the cloudy sky painted on the wall at the back of the stage, the

white panels that frame each scene — is a perfect ground for Emily's story. It is abstract enough to remind us that we aren't in a literal place at all, but inside someone's mind. And it gives direction to the well-drilled, dense choreography Unger has devised for the actors playing the hospital staff.

Martin John Gallagher's sound design supplies important information to the play, indicating Emily's audio hallucinations and distortions. Jim Weisman's lighting design fits with Stapleton's stage design.

Except for Miller, who creates an appropriately sympathetic therapist, each cast member plays a cou-

THEATER REVIEW

Wings

COMPANY: Profile Theatre Project

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

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 22

TICKETS: \$16, discounts for students, seniors and families available

CALL: 242-0080

ple of characters, either other patients or medical personnel. But their primary function is to generate the briskness of action in a hospital, action that Emily mistakes for the routines of a prison. It's an interesting parallel to consider.

All of this may sound a bit on the grim side. But Kopit's suggestions of humor are seized by Sterchi and the rest of the cast to lighten the mood.

Still, "Wings" is a demanding play for audiences, who must struggle right along with Emily as she tries to find the words to fit what she sees going on in the world. And we must watch her suffer. At one point she finally figures out that something is wrong — with her. She says: "They still pretend they do not understand me. I believe they may be mad." But then: "No they're not mad, I am mad. Today I heard it. EVERYTHING I speak is wronged. SOMETHING HAS BEEN DONE TO ME."

It's a heartbreaking moment. But neither Kopit nor Sterchi allows it to be sentimental. Emily isn't that kind of woman. She's brave, a woman who used to walk on the wings of airborne airplanes when she was younger, and she's up to this "strange adventure," as she calls it.

Sterchi is up to it, too. And so is the Profile Theatre Project with this, promising first production.