



## Points of Entry

### Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble Finds a Way Through *Night*

By Thomas Ross



Photo by Owen Carey

MIDWAY THROUGH the rarely produced 1993 María Irene Fornés play *Enter the Night*, a struggling playwright named Jack gives a manically flying monologue about the future of the human race. He predicts a world where everyone is sick, where actors find work portraying the effects of illness, and where plot takes a backseat while audiences deduce characters' ailments by the color of pills they pop on stage.

If that experience sounds baffling, try seeing Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble's (PETE) production of *Enter the Night*, directed by Alice Reagan. It's a play that devotes as much time to expounding on illness as it does to screening scenes from the 1919 D.W. Griffith film *Broken Blossoms* (which are immediately reenacted), and to a zany but unmoving scene of Jack rehearsing his duties as an assistant stage manager on a "Ridiculous Theatre" production.

The play takes place in the city apartment of young nurse Tressa (Amber Whitehall) as she hosts Jack (Jacob Coleman) and Paula (Cristi Miles), a farmer struggling with both her finances and health.

Jack is a severe hypochondriac who believes he has AIDS, despite regular testing. Illness is an obvious throughline in the play, but *Enter the Night* also focuses on love and the strange ways it soothes. That reenactment of *Broken Blossoms* is a form of pseudosexual romance between Tressa and Jack, both in drag. And when Paula and Tressa read Jack's play in overblown German-ish accents, Miles and Whitehall exhibit an impossibly campy chemistry.

That chemistry is important for a play with too many ideas and too little conflict. Instead of that conflict, Whitehall, Miles, and Coleman inhabit the idiosyncrasies of love in an open, engaging way.

Miles is especially good as Paula, bringing some much-needed subtlety to the stage, although Paula doesn't see as much of the surreal, dreamy action. Coleman, meanwhile, bounces effortlessly from mania to melancholy, keeping even the leftest of left turns compelling—like announcing that he's been gang raped and enjoyed it.

Ultimately, PETE and director Reagan have pulled off an unpredictably surefooted production of a wobbly and unbalanced play. Sitting in the audience is like seeing one of Jack's future plays—the real pleasure comes not from tracking any meaningful arc, but from parsing the specificities of the performances and guessing at the methods of love's anodyne.