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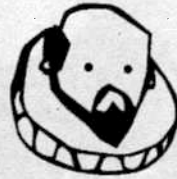
Many Hats' new show, *Mutt*, is one of the most ambitious productions I've seen in this town. Based loosely on writer/performer Lava Alapai's own experiences as a bi-racial woman, *Mutt* aims to shake up the way Portlanders talk about race, and to engage multicultural actors and audience members in what is currently a predominantly white theater scene. Not only that, but Many Hats hopes to accomplish all of this via a production that includes '80s-inspired choreography, a girl-on-girl romantic subplot, and an ambulant Whoopi Goldberg puppet. It's a lot to pack into one production. *Mutt* deliberately raises a lot of questions, and perhaps the most pressing is whether it does so in a respectful or considered way.

Serena Matthews is a nerdy, overachieving high schooler who loves Madonna and is president of the drama club. Everything changes, though, when she is summoned to the guidance counselor's office and informed that she's made a mistake on her college application: She has checked the box for Caucasian, when in fact she is half black. This information is a lot to swallow, for Serena and the audience, but it's best just to accept the premise and see where it takes you.

It takes you, first off, to an unnamed college in the South where Serena is matriculating on a basketball scholarship—despite the fact that she doesn't know how to play basketball. This is one of the many jokes in *Mutt* that sort of swerved past my seat toward the black audience members sitting around me. The joke was not that all black people are good at basketball: The joke was that if you're African American, someone might've made that assumption about you at some point.

While at college, Serena sets about learning how to be black; she begins by renting *The Color Purple* and is visited by a Whoopi Goldberg puppet who becomes her mentor, teaching her about African American hairstyles and why it's okay for black people to say "nigger." Meanwhile, she meets and falls for a dance major named Lane (Jessica Wallenfels) who is working on a piece about the life of Stevie Wonder.

Full of pop culture references, campy choreography, and a quick wit, *Mutt* is an immediately engaging production. The show



THEATER

is packed with sharp one-liners and clever sight gags, not to mention a great soundtrack. Alapai's characterization of the naïve, overeager teenager is a little goofy, and seems to involve more hopping and gesticulating than precisely necessary, but she's a fairly likeable protagonist for all that. Wallenfels' character is well drawn (the college girl who blithely talks about taking away the "power" of certain words), and her posse of gal pals, played by four dancers in black, is a silent but sexy presence. Jane Fellows juggles a handful of roles, from Serena's mother to Johnny Carson to the school guidance counselor, and she does so with impeccable timing.

Mutt pulls no punches, and while Alapai's script is quite fearless, it also suffers from a tendency to reduce black culture down to a series of clichés. I saw the play with my roommate, who was outright offended by the flippant manner in which racial stereotypes were trucked out, dusted off, and paraded for the audience's amusement. Personally, I had trouble with the scene in which Serena goes "gangsta," putting on baggy clothes and a beanie and talking "black." During this phase, Serena is acting

out, withdrawing from her girlfriend Lane in frustration. The guise is as quickly dropped, with little exploration of what has just happened. The audience is left with a reiteration of a stereotype, rather than any substantive exploration of African American identity—or even a coherent explanation of why this identity is hard to pin down, or how it doesn't actually exist, or anything. This is problematic, especially when at the end of the play Serena realizes she should just "be herself" (groan) and returns to her former dorky ways.

I've been thinking a lot about this show; it pushed a lot of buttons, and deals directly with the discomfort many Portlanders feel around the subject of race. The way *Mutt* seemed to sum up the black experi-



LAVA ALAPAI & HELMUT WALLENFELS

Mutt

Many Hats at Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N Interstate, 952-6646, Thurs-Sun 8 pm, through Dec 9, \$12, Thurs sliding scale

ence with baggy pants and a diagram explaining the difference between cornrows and dreadlocks was hard for this white girl to stomach, but I can't deny that with this production, *Mutt* began a conversation that is too rarely had. Many Hats raises a lot of hard questions, in truly entertaining fashion, but I can't help feeling that they shirked from really addressing them, instead opting for a tidy wrap up and happily ever after. ALISON HALLETT