

WILLAMETTE WEEK

VOLUME 33, ISSUE 3 ■ NOVEMBER 29, 2006

Portland
News and Culture



PHOTO BY LAVA ALAPAI AND HELMUT WALLENFELS

WVW MUTT

Who's That Girl meets Ebony and Ivory: Lava Alapai throws race in the blender.

"Written and performed by"; "autobiographical experiences"; "world premiere"; "Whoopi Goldberg puppet"—these are the kind of words

that, as a reviewer, make my blood run cold. They bring to mind one-man vanity shows about growing up queer and Catholic in Beaverton, torturous kvetch-fests accented with the sort of willfully abominable "puppetry" that shamed this year's Time-Based Art festival. They scream, "Don't go! Send an intern!"

So you'll understand why, after seeing all those words in close proximity in the press release for Many Hats Collaboration's first full-length production, I had very low expectations for the show. I couldn't force an unpaid intern to go in my stead on Thanksgiving weekend, so I crossed my fingers and dragged my wife along, hoping it would be quick.

What can I say? Sometimes my instincts are wrong.

Turns out *Mutt*, Lava Alapai's confession about discovering her biracial identity (at 18!) and attempting to fit in at a Southern college, has a whole lot going for it. For one thing, the story is an interesting and unusual one: Serena, whose mother is white and whose father is absent, is informed by a guidance counselor that she is African-American after she marks "Caucasian" on all of her college applications. Stunned, she applies only to colleges in Dixie, gets a basketball scholarship despite never having played, and tries to "become black" with the help of a "Whoopi Fairy Godmother."

It all sounds a little contrived, but here's the catch: Alapai has devoted a lot of thought to race and racism in America, and she gives a much more interesting and considered opinion than similar attempts to reconcile conflicted ethnic identity, like Miracle Theater's awful, preachy *Road to Xibalbá*. *Mutt* doesn't take itself too seriously, balancing humor and awkwardness in palatable proportions.

Even the puppet isn't off-putting. Adult puppets are a regrettable cliché in contemporary theater, but Alapai is a puppeteer for Vancouver, Wash.-based Tears of Joy who knows her stuff and has trained Yolanda Suarez to make the most of her prop.

Mutt is still a little rough around the edges, with some sloppy transitions and an overlong dance sequence by the very talented Jessica Wallenfels and company, but it stands out nonetheless as a fine example of the kind of interesting, original work that could, someday, put Portland on the theater map. BEN WATERHOUSE.

Many Hats Collaboration at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N Interstate Ave., 952-6646. 8 pm Thursdays-Saturdays. Closes Dec. 9. \$12, Thursdays are "pay what you can."