

## On stage

Tuesday, January 10, 2006

By **BRETT OPPEGAARD** **Columbian**  
staff writer

Continuing to probe for its niche, The New Blue Parrot Theatre will open a comedy of manners this week by 19th century Irish playwright Oscar Wilde.

After being one of the top local theater companies for decades, Blue Parrot collapsed and went dormant in 2001. It was resurrected last spring in Washougal, and the group's first three shows since then have been classic musicals. But artistic director Jennifer Johnson acknowledges that the troupe still is searching for its identity.



The New Blue Parrot Theatre will be dipping into different styles of shows to see what sells in Clark County, starting with its latest production, "The Importance of Being Earnest," by Oscar Wilde. The dramatic comedy, which opens Thursday, features Rebecca Irving, right, as Cecily Cardew, and Jesse Graff, holding Irving during a recent rehearsal, as Algernon Moncrieff. (Steven Lane/The Columbian)

"Our No. 1 goal is to figure out what these audiences (in east Clark County) want," she says. "What is going to attract them? We're trying all sorts of different things in the next two years to see what sells."

That includes a version of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" scheduled for April, with the story shifted to modern times and acted out in the inner city of a large metropolis. It also includes Wilde's dramatic comedy, "The Importance of Being Earnest," with performances starting Thursday and continuing through Jan. 22 at the newly renovated auditorium in Washougal High School.

The show is a tale of two truth-bending gentlemen in 1890s England who find love amid their deceptions, then have to untangle the mess within the strict social boundaries of the period. When The Old Slocum House Theatre Company produced the show in 1998, men played the female roles and women the male roles. In this production, a man, Kevin Scott, will play the frumpy part of Lady Bracknell.

During the first year of the original production of the show, 1895, playwright Wilde was sentenced to prison for two years of hard labor for "gross indecency" after a sensational British libel trial and scandal over his homosexuality. When he was released, the broken soul moved to Paris, where he soon died. This play about double lives has been revived more than any other Wilde work.

Blue Parrot has seen a progressive rise in both attendance and profit during its three shows after the hiatus. The first, "The Music Man," attracted an average of 108

people per night over six April performances at the 400-seat Washougal theater and cost the company \$1,500 in losses. "Bye Bye Birdie" drew an average of 112 per show and finished \$700 in the black in August, while "The Wizard of Oz," which was the debut of the company's children's theater division, brought in an average of 231 patrons per performance and raised \$3,000 in October.

Part of that improved performance is due to a restructuring of the business model. For "The Music Man," Blue Parrot paid flat fees of \$500 to the director, musical director and choreographer, which, when added together, happened to match the total loss for the show. For the past two productions, both finishing with small profits, the company has been offering its staff a percentage of gross income, giving the producer and director 40 percent of each take to split how they choose.

"Our first two shows were done on (borrowed money from) credit cards," Johnson says. "With 'The Wizard of Oz,' we were able to have enough left over to pay some of the initial production costs (for 'Earnest'). ? We would like to eventually make enough profit off of one show to pay the expenses of the next one."

Director Patrick Spike, who has been looking for a space in Clark County to base his own troupe, Spiral Stage Theatre Group, says Blue Parrot attracted him and some other veteran performers from throughout the region with the hope that this upcoming period piece will be a significant stepping stone for the company.

'On the verge'

"Clark County seems on the verge," he says. "With the work being done on the Artillery Building (to create an artists' colony at Vancouver Barracks) and all of the growth in downtown Vancouver, it seems like this area is really positioned well for housing and cultivating and embracing some arts organizations on a more professional level."

Spike, who lives in Portland and has a master's degree in directing from California's Humboldt State University, says he hopes to find a place for his group within a year.

"(Clark County) is underserved right now," he says. "As more and more people move into the area, there are a lot of doorways opening."

If you go

What: The New Blue Parrot Theatre presents "The Importance of Being Earnest," by Oscar Wilde.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday as well as Jan. 19-21, plus additional performances at 2 p.m. Sunday and Jan. 22.

Where: Washougal High School's Washburn Performing Arts Center, 1201 39th St., Washougal.

Cost: \$10, \$8 for children 12 and younger and seniors 60 and older.

Information: Call 360-696-1155, or look on the Web at [www.newblueparrot.com](http://www.newblueparrot.com).

## **The Columbian Publishing Co. copyright & permissions rules**

All materials appearing in The Columbian are protected by copyright as a collective work or compilation under U.S. copyright and other laws and are the property of The Columbian Publishing Company or the party credited as the provider of the content. You may not copy, reproduce, distribute, publish, display, perform, modify, create derivative works, transmit, or in any way exploit any such content, nor may you distribute any part of this content over any network, including a local area network, sell or offer it for sale, or use such content to construct any kind of database. However you may download from [columbian.com](http://columbian.com) such content for your own personal, noncommercial use but only if you make only one machine readable copy and/or one print copy. You may not alter or remove any copyright or other notice from copies of the content. Copying or storing any content except as provided above is expressly prohibited without prior written permission of the copyright holder identified in the individual content's copyright notice.

To obtain permission to photocopy content of The Columbian, contact Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923; FAX (978) 750-4470, or [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). All other requests for permission should be directed via email to [archives@columbian.com](mailto:archives@columbian.com).