The Odd Couple (Clackamas Repertory Theatre)
What a sweet old couple!

Here's something of a confession (and perhaps a disclaimer): I've never seen the movie version of The Odd Couple. I'm familiar with the plot, of course, and I've watched maybe half an episode of the television series. But Clackamas Repertory Theatre's production of Neil Simon's classic comedy was my first viewing of the full show or film. What an enjoyable first encounter.

The familiar plot: Oscar Madison (Tim True), a newly single sportswriter, lives alone in a rumpled New York City apartment. He's upfront about his shortcomings: “Life goes on, even for those of us who are divorced, broke and sloppy.” Felix Ungar (Michael O'Connell) is
finicky and neurotic, the kind of guy who wears his seat belt at a drive-in movie. He is, in Oscar’s words, “the only man in the world with clenched hair.” When his wife tosses him out, he moves in with Oscar. The cheerful slob and the depressive neat freak, together for our amusement.

But Oscar and Felix are not stock characters. The enduring strength of Simon’s droll comedy is not in the plot, but in the effortless way he exposes these regular guys as flawed and sympathetic as they fire impeccably constructed zingers at one another. Longtime friends True and O’Connell have the chemistry to do it. Sometimes squabbling like a couple, they also take turns playing the petulant child to the other’s scolding parent. Their comic pacing is perfect and their physical comedy unfussily but hilarious. I was especially impressed with True marching across the couch like a cat kicking up kitty litter.

David Smith-English keeps the direction straight, wisely leaving the focus on a strong script and cast. Jayne Stevens and Annie Rimmer were humorous as the tittering Pigeon sisters, but they’re stuck in the show’s weakest roles and at times feel a little flat. The four actors playing Felix and Oscar’s poker buddies are stronger, delivering juicy one-liners without siphoning attention away from True and O’Connell.

Portland loves contemporary theater, and I too enjoy the challenges of inventive and intellectual productions. Sometimes, though, it just feels good to relax with a well-worn show. With actors as skilled and funny as True and O’Connell driving it, this is a well-oiled production delivering an evening of easy entertainment.

SEE IT: Clackamas Community College, Osterman Theatre, 19600 S Molalla Ave., 594-6047. 7:30 pm Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30 pm Sundays through July 22. $12-$24.