A timely ‘romp’ opens Clackamas Rep’s 10th anniversary season

With a cast full of Portland actors, Clackamas Repertory Theatre will kick off its 10th anniversary year when the romantic comedy “The Philadelphia Story” takes to the stage on June 27.

The plot of the play, set in the late 1930s, revolves around Tracy Lord, a Philadelphia socialite, whose next-day wedding plans are disrupted by the appearance of her ex-husband and an encounter with a handsome tabloid magazine reporter assigned to cover the society wedding.

That’s when “sparks start to fly,” notes director Doren Elias, associate artistic director of Clackamas Repertory Theatre, a suburban company located in Oregon City that has consistently produced quality plays but perhaps been overshadowed by the likes of Lakewood Theatre Company in Lake Oswego and Broadway Rose Theatre Company in Tigard.

As “Philadelphia Story” progresses, the characters engage in witty repartee, champagne flows, fists fly and things don’t turn out the way they were planned.

The play was a hit on Broadway in 1939, but is best remembered as the 1940 movie version, with Katharine Hepburn reprising her role as Tracy, Cary Grant playing Dexter, her former husband, and Jimmy Stewart starring as Mike Connor, the reporter from Spy magazine.

Elias directed “Harvey” last year, so he has some experience “re-inventing a different and fresher look” for period material.

Audiences will like the fact that there are some parallels between when “The Philadelphia Story” takes place and current times, he says, adding that “there are some timely political messages and issues, and it is fun seeing celebrities knocked off their perches.”

But at heart, he adds, the play is “a romantic-comedy romp, with crackling dialogue and great witticisms. It will throw the audience back to a different period.”

The cast includes some interesting individuals.

Hillarie Putnam is willing to commute from Seattle to Oregon City to tackle Tracy, because she loves the character.

“She has so much internal conflict that many women have to deal with. This show, however, allows for much of those issues to boil to the surface and when it happens in a stage comedy, allows people to relate,” she says.
Putnam is actually an Alaska resident and ardent outdoorswomen, who moved to the Pacific Northwest nearly three years ago; she met Elias in Portland, he asked her to play Tracy, “and the rest is history,” she says.

She has a number of film and television credits in Los Angeles, and can currently be seen hunting bears in Kodiak, Alaska, in the documentary “The Hunt” on The History Channel on Sunday nights.

People need to come see “The Philadelphia Story,” Putnam says, “because it is a quick-witted, intelligent, attractive and relatable romantic comedy. It is amazing how even though years have passed since the show drew its very first curtain, all the elements are still seen in relationships today.”

As the play progresses, Tracy finds herself surrounded by three very different men vying for her attention: Dexter, her ex-husband; Mike, a reporter; and of course, George, her fiancé.

Playing Dexter is Tom Walton, a chiropractor with a clinic in downtown Portland; although this marks his CRT debut, he has been a member of the Northwest Classical Theatre Company for the past 13 years, and has appeared on other Portland stages.

Dexter, he says, “is from a different era; he comes from money and has always been surrounded by money.”

It is an honor and “great fun to play those roles that the greats have played in the past. Wonderful actors like Cary Grant said these same words,” Walton says.

What does he like best about his character?

“He finds humor in every situation; nothing scares him and he sees what he wants and he goes after it,” Walton says.

“This is a charming, fun love story that will allow people to sit back and step into a different time.”

Jayson Shanafelt, a long-time CRT company member, has some experience playing a role associated with Stewart, as he played the lead in last year’s CRT production of “Harvey.”

“It is always interesting to do a piece revamping an older icon,” he says about playing the reporter who catches Tracy’s eye. “People enjoy seeing how it is modernized, and we are always trying to find a balance between a period piece and making it relevant.”

Clackamas Repertory Theatre’s “The Philadelphia Story,” directed by Doren Elias, opens Friday, June 27, and continues through July 20 at Osterman Theatre at Clackamas Community College, 19600 S. Molalla Ave., Oregon City (tickets at clackamasrep.org). Performances take place at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, with 2:30 p.m. Sunday matinees.
Romantic sparks light up 'Philadelphia Story'