

The Oregonian

Fertile Ground offers eclectic mix of shows

Monday, January 25, 2010

MARTY HUGHLEY

The Oregonian

As an experienced publicist, Trisha Mead is practiced at shining a positive light on things. But reached Sunday morning -- two days into the frenetic run of her pet project, the Fertile Ground festival -- she sounds authentically upbeat and relaxed. Maybe she's really just groggy, having taken in seven shows already amid her responsibilities as festival director. In any case, her early assessment is a cheery, "It seems to be running just the way it's supposed to."

The festival, in its second year, is an umbrella for more than 50 shows being staged around Portland through Feb. 2, primarily theater but also dance, comedy, music and various hybrids. It's an eye-opening showcase of the local performing arts scene's vigor and variety, and is starting to draw audiences to its cause, which Mead sums up as "support local artists and try something new."

One weekend standout was "The Hillsboro Story," presented as a work-in-progress at Artists Repertory Theatre. Created by Susan Banyas out of extensive interviews, research and her childhood memories, it tells the fascinating story of her Ohio hometown wrestling with the issue of public school desegregation in the mid-1950s.

With almost poetically affecting text, plus wittingly expressive movement choreographed by Gregg Bielemeier, Banyas and three other women (Jennifer Lanier, Paige Jones and LaVerne Green) juggle the numerous characters, male and female, in a drama sparked when a well-meaning white city engineer sets fire to the run-down elementary school used for black children. Packed with heart and historical detail, it's a remarkably rewarding piece -- likely to grow more so later on, when Banyas integrates more visual design elements.