

G-rated play has them laughing so hard they cry



Rick Singer/For The Register-Guard

Tim Behrens plays 10 people, two animals and a mummy.

By **BOB WELCH**
The Register-Guard

WITH NATIONAL THEATER exploring once-taboo topics and comedy pushing the limits of taste, writer Patrick McManus is bringing a strange new twist to the stage: humor cleaner than a high-mountain stream.

"A Fine and Pleasant Misery: The Humor of Patrick E. McManus" will be presented at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday at Churchill High, 1850 Bailey Hill Road, its first Oregon performance since a tune-up in Baker City when it first started.

What's a nice show like this doing in a time like ours?

"When you do a lot of risqué stuff and push the edges of humor, you take away from the audiences' ability to use their imagination," says Tim Behrens, who not only stars in McManus' G-rated production, but is the production. "Humor always prospers on

surprise. But a lot of standup comics think that means shock, and it doesn't."

Behrens, a 47-year-old Spokane actor, plays 10 people, two animals and a mummy in the play that debuted in October 1992.

McManus, 60 and also from Spokane, based much of the script on material from his 11 outdoor-oriented books, the last five of which have made the New York Times Bestseller List. Among his more popular offerings: "They Shoot Canoes, Don't They?" "Never Sniff a Gift Fish" and "A Fine and Pleasant Misery."

Though the play hasn't branched out much beyond the Northwest, it has received enthusiastic reviews.

"This is no mere dramatized reading," wrote Jim Kershner in The Spokesman-Review in Spokane. "(The audience was) laughing so hard, and for so long, I was afraid paramedics would need to be

called in. I thought people might hurt themselves, pull tendons, bust guts."

Drama critic Jerry Kraft of KPBX Spokane Public Radio said, "There are times when one has so much fun, and the combination of writing, performance and potential is so exhilarating that you can't help but want to run out and tell all your friends. I predict this show is going to have a huge success, not just in this area but wherever else they want to take it."

Wrote Charlie Powell in the Moscow-Pullman Daily News, "It is written and performed like good radio comedy used to be . . . The two-act play is a must-see for anyone who ever slept outside or grew up in a rural setting."

McManus, who retired 10 years ago as an English professor at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, was inspired by Hal Holbrook's "Mark Twain Tonight" performance.

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But it wasn't until he ran into Behrens, a former graduate student of his, that the play idea took flight. McManus was trying to read some of his stories for a videotape to be used at a New York sales conference.

Behrens, who was doing some avant-garde theater, and marketing and reading for an audio book company, asked McManus for a shot.

"I'm absolutely not an actor," said McManus. "Tim did the readings and did a wonderful job. We sent the tape to New York and it was a hit."

Fired up, McManus wrote "A Fine and Pleasant Misery" in three days, handed it over to Behrens and left on a book tour. When he returned, Behrens was debuting the play in Sand Point, Idaho, McManus' home town.

"I told Tim beforehand that I wasn't going to sit in the theater. I was going to stay out in the lobby and if I didn't hear any laughing in the first five minutes, I was leaving. But he knocked them dead. Looking back, it wasn't all that planned. It just kind of happened."

The play has been revised, polished and presented more than 80 times since. In fact, Behrens quit his job and is now doing the show full time.

The one-man play has no scenery and only a handful of props, many of which are hidden in an old trunk McManus (naturally, played by Behrens) uncovers while cleaning out the garage. As McManus pulls out bits of memorabilia, he is reminded of boyhood experiences.

"It's more than storytelling," said Behrens. "It's theater. Hal Holbrook, in 'Twain,' is touching more than he is funny. I think our show is funnier. We once had five generations of a family come back stage; there was something for everybody. One letter from a woman thanked me because she had never seen her husband cry before and he laughed so hard at the end of the first act that he burst into tears and put his head on her shoulder."

What makes it work, says Behrens,

is that the audience is forced to use its imagination. In fact, one of the funniest scenes — two boys frightened during a sleepout — is done in eight minutes of complete darkness.

"All you have is my voice and the darkness, but you can tell the audience is seeing the scene, they're building it in their minds."

For McManus the writer, the experience has been eye-opening. "I'm a little surprised at the emotional involvement of the audience," he said. "It's very exhilarating to hear the laughter. It's almost scary at times. You don't see that after you've written a book. Someone can tell you they laughed hard, but you wonder: Did they really? Here, you can actually see it work."

"Another thing: A book, in many ways, is a dead thing. It just lies there. This is a living kind of thing that changes."

He's been fascinated at how different audiences can be. "What I'm learning is that age has a lot to do with it. We do a section on old war-surplus stores, for example. Older audiences in small towns love it. But in larger places, with younger audience, they don't laugh as much. It's because younger audiences don't remember war-surplus stores, don't have that basis in their imaginations to visualize the places. In a book, you can explain it. In a play, they either grasp it instantly or they don't."

Having sold more than 4 million books and having a regular column in "Outdoor Life," McManus isn't desperate for money. He has a townhouse in Spokane and a retreat on Lake Pend Orielle in Idaho. He is pursuing the possibility of a National Public Radio show and movies, though he's more enthusiastic about the airways than the cinema.

"I'm kind of at a point where unless

the project is fun, I don't have to do it," he said. "And this is fun."

The play was recently performed in California for the first time. In the spring, it will begin a run in the Midwest. "It's inching its way toward larger, more metropolitan communities," said McManus.

In New York recently, he watched a British comedy in the Brooklyn Academy of Music Theater. "There must have been 3,000 people there — lots of bathroom humor, but Americans don't seem to find that very amusing. If Tim had been on that stage, I know he would have knocked them dead."

McManus won't be on hand for the Eugene performances, though his books will be.

Tickets are \$11 for adults and \$7 for students. They're available at Marketplace Books, Eugene Athletic Supply Co., Home Waters Fly Fishing and at the door.