

Staying alive

by Jim Hunger

"There are fewer starving actors here in Portland than there are in New York or Los Angeles," says local actor Jay Randall Horenstein. Conversations with local performers indicate that the notion that actors must migrate to one of the country's performing arts hubs — New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles — is largely false. The image of the starving actor barely surviving between gigs appears to be largely illusory, at least in Portland.

Wendy Westerwelle, one of the most successful local actors, comments, "I think we have it much better here than any place else. We can work all the time here."

"There's a lot of work here, and it's not as competitive and vicious as it is in the big cities. You don't sit around waiting for jobs night and day for months at a time," says Westerwelle.

Local talent Arthur Harold agrees: "I think that Portland may be different in that there is actually more theater going on here."

Echoing these sentiments, Horenstein says, "There really is a lot going on here, more than people realize, really worthwhile stuff, too. You don't have to go to an Equity house to see good theater."

Oregon Contemporary Theatre, Portland's only recent professional theater employing Actors' Equity union members has been dark for some time. Since union members must play for union houses, or be granted waivers, most local actors consider membership in the union to be unwise, at least for now.

Although salaries are lower in non-union houses — at times nonexistent — opportunities are great. Says Westerwelle, "If you're an actor and you care more about acting than money, Portland is a fabulous acting town; the theater is great here."

Westerwelle is one of Portland's latest major success stories; her last production,



Wendy Westerwelle as *Soph*.

Soph: The Last of the Red Hot Mamas, played to sold-out houses through most of its run this winter. Plans to move the play, written by Westerwelle and Vana O'Brien, to Los Angeles, have been delayed due to complications, possibly until next fall. In the meantime, *Soph* reopens in June at the Storefront Theatre.

Of her recent success, Westerwelle says, "Portland is a funny town, you know; whenever you get a certain degree of popularity, people always want you to leave. They're always saying, 'When are you going?' or 'How come you're still here?'"

Westerwelle explains that Portlanders assume that success on the stage must lie elsewhere. "I don't know why people think that. But I feel like I am a success here and I love it here, and if *Soph* doesn't go to L.A. I have no intention of leaving. I mean, I may tour my show, but I'm not going to leave town."

Horenstein and Harold also express a willingness to remain on the Portland scene. Horenstein says, "I think a lot of us stay because it really is pretty comfortable here, and if you go someplace else, you have to start all over again." Harold expresses similar sentiments: "Well, I like the town; it's cheap here, and I'm kind of chicken."

Most actors need supplemental income, and this is true for Portland artists as well. Because of the unpredictable nature of the profession, actors need to find situations that will be flexible enough to allow them to modify their work schedule on short notice, perhaps even to take leaves of absence from their secondary jobs while they are engaged in a production. Two favored areas for additional part-time employment are in other phases of entertainment and in restaurants.

Harold has done both: when I was out of college the only job I could get was a CETA job costuming at Storefront. I'd done a lot of costuming in college; that was my work study, and so that's basically where I got more or less journey-level skills in seamstery."

Harold, whose most recent role was as Solange in Genet's *The Maids* at the Sumus Theatre, has formed a designing business, *Realizations*, with partner Robin Chilstrom. Recently they worked on *The Portland Civic*

Theatre production of *Funny Girl*.

Horenstein works in a less typical trade for actors. "I'm fortunate enough to have a pretty terrific job — not a big paying job — I work for my cousins. They have a coupon newspaper and I'm a paste-up artist for them. . . . I have a back-up person, and if I have to go to an audition they have that person fill in."

Says Horenstein, "They realize that what I do for them is not one of my number one priorities, but I try to make it number one because they're real special people."

"I just make a living performing," says Westerwelle. "I do commercials, so I can live off what I make from commercials and performing. Also, people call me all the time to do something: fashion shows, or commentary, or guest appearances. I just sang with the Sometime Jazz Band."

Commercials can be a lucrative sideline, but they aren't dependable, as Westerwelle points out: "Commercials are really few and far between. They pay great when you get them. So one month I may make a lot of money and another I may not work."

Ambitious Portland actors can find work in the theater on a fairly consistent basis if they are ambitious, though few are able to survive solely on what they make on the stage. "I've been really lucky," Horenstein remarks. "For the past two years I've been working practically full time. More than half of my income came just from theater alone."

Says Horenstein, "I'm really proud to say that I've bought my groceries, paid my car insurance and my rent with money from the theater."

The Portland theater scene has much to recommend itself to aspiring actors, and that's no doubt why so many talented performers remain here despite the lack of a professional theater. The number of production houses and the attendance at individual performances have increased steadily over the last few years. Says Horenstein, "I think it's really exciting to know that there can be anywhere from sixteen to thirty shows going on, and there's always someone who will come and see you. That's really encouraging, and the numbers are getting bigger."

Actors generally agree that Portland is not

a town where performers get rich, but other qualities attract and keep artists here. Says Westerwelle, "I went to Los Angeles and I saw people doing the worst theater I think I've ever seen in my whole life — just horrible."

"In L.A. it's who you know. Most people won't even touch you: you're dirt," she says. "You have to know someone or be someone's kid. . . . You have to decide whether you have the ego and stamina for Los Angeles, and I don't have either one."

Portland's bush league status as an entertainment center has saved it from the less savory aspects of the industry, such as nepotism and dehumanizing treatment of actors, but continuing progress in improving the artistic environment will assure the city of continued excellence and variety on the stage.

"Public awareness is really important," says Horenstein. "The public is beginning to realize that it really is a pretty inexpensive way to spend an evening, and I think it can be enlightening."

Processing Lily Tomlin

by Sandra de Helen

Lily Tomlin has a new show which is on its way to Broadway. She stopped in Portland for three weeks in June with her "Works in Process."

The format is more play-like than her previous work, particularly the second half. Trudy, formerly Tess, the bag lady with outer space chums, ties the whole thing together with her eccentric philosophy. Other characters, new and old, make their appearances and play out their scenes.

For the second half, we meet several feminists, some of whom are Lesbians. The main character here is Lynn, who has a relationship with a Lesbian; however, after they break up she meets and marries Bob. A Lesbian couple figures largely in Lynn's life, and they are not left behind when Lynn marries, but continue to be her most important friends.

Lily Tomlin is a talented, creative genius. She is so skilled at *Mime*, her invisible props become real to the audience. She is so efficient at changing character that three or four characters can play out a scene right before your eyes without the audience getting lost.

Each character has its own voice, walk, mannerisms. And Lily Tomlin brings all the characters to life. I caught myself thinking about Lynn's twin boys a few days after I saw the show. Then I wondered who those kids belong to. Then I remembered the twins are children of a character, not even characters themselves! That's how real she makes her people. She refers to them as her family, and it's easy to see why.

In addition to all this skill and talent, Lily Tomlin possesses a political consciousness. And I know, because it's right out there for everybody to see. She manages to cover an incredible amount of political issues in an incredibly short time. This doesn't mean she tosses out politically correct phrases from time to time, when it's convenient. What it does mean is her characters embody her philosophy, her politics, her awareness. And that shows up over and over.

Tomlin moves people: To laughter, to tears, to new understanding of old issues, and to deeper understanding of current issues. For all I know, she covers future issues as well.

Some people put their money where their mouths are, Lily Tomlin puts her mouth where her heart is — and it works.

