

## Oregonian's "buddy" play at Blue Room

by E. Jane Westlake

Theatre pieces can provide us with fairly dependable historical sources. We could pick up Maxim Gorky's work to see what was going on for the lower classes in Russia around the time of the revolution, and a few of Ibsen's plays tell us how women were being treated eighty years ago. In the next century, someone will be studying *As Is*, *The Normal Heart*, and maybe even *Seven Sundays* and be able to gain some understanding of the AIDS crisis. He or she might come to see what it was like for the American gay man during a time when a frightening epidemic was spreading through the gay population.

Unlike *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*, *Seven Sundays* is not a product of New York. It's a home grown piece by local playwright Michael Scott Reed, a graduate of Lewis and Clark College. It premiered at Lewis and Clark and is being produced again right here in Portland. The director, Paul Mortimer, feels that it surpasses the New York plays in making a human statement and deserves a much wider audience. That is why Mortimer, upon seeing *Seven Sundays* performed at Lewis and Clark, decided that he wanted to direct the play himself.

Interestingly and encouragingly, Mortimer is not gay. He feels, however, that this has not presented a problem for him in terms of ef-



Kevin Leinbach and Doug Martin in *Seven Sundays* through April 12, at the PCT Blue Room.

fectively interpreting the play. "I thought — 'Am I the right person to direct this play?' It's a very human play. It teaches about human nature and human relationships," he said.

Mortimer feels that this play is about friendship, and how friendship forms that wouldn't have under other circumstances. He also feels that what the playwright says about sexuality and relationships relates to Mortimer's own heterosexuality. "It says something

about how you romanticize about someone and then when you get involved and get to know them, it's a hassle," he said.

With *Seven Sundays* maybe our historian of tomorrow will also see beyond the issue of the AIDS crisis and see herself or himself reflected in what Reed has written. Maybe by then everyone in the heterosexual world will see gay issues and feelings as human issues and feelings as Paul Mortimer does.

*Seven Sundays* plays from March 28th through April 12th in the Portland Civic Theatre Blue Room on Friday and Saturday evenings at 11:30 (take a nap beforehand, I'm sure you don't want to miss any of it). Tickets are only three dollars in advance and three-fifty at the door. *Seven Sundays* is an independent production by Nocturne Productions, but reservations can be made at the Portland Civic box office.

Playwright Michael Scott Reed describes *Seven Sundays* as "a play about friendship." The play involves two gay men, otherwise strangers, who meet when one becomes a "buddy" (or in Portland parlance, a PAL) for the other. The play documents seven Sundays in the lives of these two men. Reed stresses that "*Seven Sundays* is not an issue play. The name of the disease isn't even mentioned. The play is about surviving, because we all have to die, don't we?"

Reed did the research for *Seven Sundays* when on an internship with *The New York Native* in 1984. The play, written the following year, has been performed and well received at both Reed and Lewis and Clark colleges. In addition, Lewis and Clark Reed's *alma mater* has staged two other of his plays. He has also written a full length play about female impersonators. "It's kind of festive," he reports.

Currently Reed is directing *Side by Side by Sondheim* at Pentangle Theatre in his native Salem. He is also working on a new play, *The Victory Party*, about a custody battle "with a gay theme."

"Sounds like I like gay themes, doesn't it?" Reed observed.

—W.C.M.

## "Normal Heart" raises difficult questions

by Rodger Larson

The AIDS crisis has had a profound effect on how gay men think, feel, and live. The early days of the epidemic in New York City — from 1981 to 1984 — are chronicled in Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* currently being produced by the Storefront Actor's Theater under the direction of Robert Nielsen. The play is about AIDS, but it's also about love. It's about dying, but also about choices. It's about fear, but also about struggle.

The Storefront production is well staged — with generally fine acting, pleasing sets and lighting, and a fast pace which never allows the bleak subject matter to become mired in sentimentality. Portland audiences, and the gay community in particular, are fortunate to have such a fine production available to them.

The play is an angry play; it's central character, Ned Weeks, is an angry man. He recognizes the threat that AIDS poses, but no one will listen to his warnings. The straight press isn't interested in reporting the deaths of gay men and the threat of the disease. The medical establishment and government agencies that fund it choose to ignore the growing epidemic. The gay men of New York are not interested in hearing that the party is over and that promiscuity is linked to death.

Weeks' response is anger — there is a lot of shouting in this play. Underlying all the shouting are important questions of responsibility, and the meaning of being gay. Does the gay community have the responsibility to protect its members? If it does, then does it have the right to tell people how to live their lives? Does gay liberation mean limitless promis-

cuity and if not, then what else does it mean?

*The Normal Heart* raises these questions against the backdrop of a personal drama. In the midst of this crusade to curb the spread of AIDS Weeks finds love. His unfolding relationship with Felix provides a counterpoint to the cause that dominates so much of Weeks' life. Watching him and Felix develop into lovers, we come to understand the real meaning of Weeks' struggle. The warmth, the tenderness, and the sweetness we see as these two men touch and kiss gives this play an emotional depth that goes beyond the rantings of a social protest play.

Playwright Kramer has raised difficult questions. Not everyone will accept his answers. The play serves an important function if it stimulates discussion and provokes us to find our own answers. Beyond that, this production by Storefront is good, gripping theater. Director Nielsen and the cast deserve credit for bringing the play to life and making public the very private experience of dealing with AIDS.

## That cute couple next door

by Jay Brown

There's this beautiful young couple spending their last day together before one of them leaves for a two-year assignment in Africa. It's a pretty ordinary story — snuggle-bunnies in the afternoon and afterwards a little shopping and a visit with a sick friend; a farewell dinner hosted by the boss and off to a going-away party. Then the business of getting through the next day until the plane leaves for Africa.

*Parting Glances*, nevertheless, is an extraordinary movie. Robert and Michael are the beautiful couple and the sick friend, Nick, has AIDS. Shot in Manhattan's "Yupper" West

Side, *Parting Glances* shows the lives of a group of gays living in a city where gay politics and social issues are an integral part of the contemporary milieu.

For me, watching *Parting Glances* was like entering a whole new territory. It's a movie about gay people that's devoid of all those Hollywood clichés — no guilt (and wonder of wonders, the PWA doesn't feel guilty, either), no long-suffering wife, etc., etc., etc. The characters are next-door neighbors who happen to be gay. *Parting Glances* is the kind of movie I've been waiting a long time for.

What story there is hinges on Michael's resentment at being "abandoned" by Robert, but by the end even that is irrelevant. A great deal happens in *Parting Glances*, though, because it's one of those charming, quiet films that are chock full of nuance and quirky little jokes — Betty, the boss' wife (deliciously played by Yolande Bavan) telling Michael that she's always known about her husband's "big secret" and couldn't care less. This skewering of the closeted gay married man is a delight.

There's even some very contemporary politics — Nick is videotaping his will and says "I leave all my money to GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis], but only for PWA's because the government that spends trillions of dollars on bombs can spend a little on AIDS research."

*Parting Glances* is ex-musician Bill Sherwood's first feature film. After 15 years of intense musical studies and composition, including two years at the Juilliard School, Sherwood gave up the full-time pursuit of music in 1972 at the advanced age of 20. A year later he enrolled as an undergraduate at Hunter College, starting off as an English major. But an introductory film course taken as a lark changed everything. Finding that film incorporates many of the things important to him — sound, photography,

literature, performance — and feeling that cinema is in the process of creating a tradition as strong as that of classical music, Sherwood quickly switched to film studies. While at Hunter he made two short 16mm films using as assistants and crew members some of the same people who later worked with him on *Parting Glances*.

Within the next ten years Sherwood had gained a degree in film production from Hunter and a lot of practical experience in both the financial and production ends of filmmaking by working for a small NY production company. Realizing that he needed time to write the films he would want to direct, Sherwood got a "survival job" in the CBS News financial department. His office-mate at CBS was Kathy Kinney, an improvisational comedienne who appears at many of New York's comedy clubs and plays Joan in *Parting Glances*.

Sherwood shot *Parting Glances* on a \$300,000 budget, a feat almost unheard of in today's filmmaking world. But there is nothing in the film which shows any stinting on quality, it's state of the art. Because of a rule change by the Screen Actor's guild which now prohibits union actors from working with non-union actors, Sherwood cast his film with theatre, television and club performers who are all making their screen debuts in *Parting Glances*. Steve Buscemi (Nick) is half a comedy team; Richard Ganoung (Michael) has worked primarily as a stage actor; John Bolger (Robert) plays an on-going character in the TV soap opera "The Guiding Light."

The "gay" film may have come of age with *Parting Glances*, and may have some of the same impact as *Taxi Zum Klo* had several years ago. I think we're lucky to have someone as sensitive and caring as Bill Sherwood leading the way. Take your kids to see *Parting Glances* — and take your parents, too.

*Parting Glances* opens in Portland on