

CULTURED

Hands-on theatre

The title says a lot, if not all: *Jerker, or the Helping Hand, a Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value, and a Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco, in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Pornographic*. This recent Robert Chesley play will be the first production of Spread Eagle Productions, a new Portland theatre company devoted to gay theatre.

Director and producer Kevin Koesel describes *Jerker* as "a dark comedy." The play involves the increasingly intimate relationship of two gay men whose only method of communication is phone conversations. Koesel says that Chesley's stark representation of our present world of safe sex is "a moral story" which is "very sexually oriented. The moral is that it's OK to be who you are in the time of the plague."

Gay theatre has languished in Portland since the death of Jerry West and the migration south to San Francisco of Harrison Pierce. Koesel founded Spread Eagle Productions to continue the avant-garde nature of gay theatre as well as to involve new and local talent.

"It's wide open," Koesel says. "We're hoping to provide a place for new directors, new scripts, and new actors," noting that it is difficult for new talent to break into the increasingly closed-ranks of mainstream Portland theatres.

Koesel's previous theatrical experience includes musicals, comedy and cabaret, and he has appeared in many local theatres. He also played the lead in another Chesley play, *Stray Dog Story*.

Jerker will provide a lot — in fact, full — exposure for the two lead actors. In anticipation, actor Darrell Geisler is bulking up at the weight room — under director's orders. Geisler's previous stage credits range from Shakespeare to experimental gay theatre. He appeared at the Cell in *West Street Gang*. Alfred Kast, the second lead, is a native of Holland, and was last seen in *Norman Is That You?* in Beaverton.

Portland's Spread Eagle Production of *Jerker* is the first outside of New York and Los Angeles. Playwright Chesley will be on hand for opening night. *Jerker* plays Friday and Saturday nights during June at Embers Avenue. "In a bar, we get a crowd that doesn't usually go to theatre," says Koesel. "It's more exciting."

Karen Belsey

W.C. McRae

Photo by: Miriam Seeger

"Off the Walls" at Echo

A hand reaches from behind a mountain of inner tubes, a figure darts across an open space, from the corner two figures move in tandem. Scene from a TV thriller? No, it's *Do Jump! Movement Theatre* rehearsing for its upcoming show, "Off the Walls," to premiere during the middle three weekends in May. With aerial devices such as bungee cords and trapezes, it's a show that promises to offer a thrill for new movement enthusiasts and *Do Jump!* fans of all ages. For Robin Lane, artistic director of *Do Jump!*, it is a further step in the exploration of translating emotions and ideas into movement.

Lane began her collaborative work in Portland in the early '70s with other like-minded movement and theatre artists. She was a member of *Moving Space Inc.* (Formerly *Portland Dance Collective* founded by Susan Banyas and Louise Steinman), which shared her interest in

non-traditional, improvisational dance and theatre. It was during this time that Lane first met Terry Sendgraff, creator of the floor style motivity trapeze that *Do Jump!* uses in its work today.

Lane's first evening length concert, "From The Inside Out," which included *Moving Space* members as well as Storefront theatre artists Robin Chilstrom and Izeta Smith, occurred in 1977. Eventually the *Moving Space* was forced to close and though they lacked a home base, various members continued to work together and produce events. It was during this homeless period in 1979 that Lane directed "Do Jump" — A women's movement performance at Dancer's Workshop.

Following this show, and the adoption of the *Do Jump* name, the company coalesced and began working together on an intensive daily basis. Rehearsals were held at the *Do Jump Dojo* in North Portland, a martial arts studio run by company member Janesa Kruse. This was the beginning of a long-term collaboration between Lane and Kruse. With company members Niya Sandish and Carolyn Holzman, the

group began to combine dance, martial arts, mime, acrobatics, and improvisation into the unique style for which *Do Jump!* is known today.

The idea of creating a theatre space that could accommodate these varying performance media had always been part of Kruse and Lane's dream. Years earlier, as payment for performing an aerial duet in the final show at the old North Portland Storefront Theatre, they received a collection of theatre seats. In the years following the show they held onto the seats in the hopes of one day finding a place to put them to use.

The discovery of the abandoned silent film theatre at SE 37th and Hawthorne was the answer, and became Echo Theatre, center for movement and performance arts, which opened its doors in 1984 as the home of *Do Jump! Movement Theatre* and *One With Heart Fighting Arts*. *Do Jump!*'s first performance in the space, "Miracle on 37th Street" was just that. "On opening night," says Lane, "there were at least twice as many people lined up outside the theatre as we had seats to offer them. While they waited we continued to build the bleachers and at 8:05 we were loading extra seating in the back door! That night's performance was a one-time only event and the energy was bouncing off the walls."

In addition to the growth of *Do Jump!*, Echo has served as the stepping stone for a number of other programs. *Do Jump!* kids' school, a program that teaches trapeze and acrobatics to kids, has grown from one class to eleven classes and now boasts an enrollment of 100 enthusiastic pupils. Adult classes in trapeze and acrobatics are also back in swing after a year long hiatus.

One With Heart has greatly expanded in size and number of classes. Many local choreographers and performance artists have premiered new works at the Echo and the Bi-Annual Choreographers' Concert has become a Portland tradition. The Echo also provides a welcoming facility for a number of alternative community groups who need a place to produce events, workshops and gatherings. Over time this has become one of Echo's more central functions.

Upcoming at the Echo is *Do Jump!*'s first all new work in over a year. "The show," says Lane, "is about resilience" — a subject which *Do Jump!* artists have come to understand intimately during their years as a non-profit arts organization. "Off the Walls," a thoughtful, passionate, joyful performance shows Fridays and Saturdays, May 8-23. For show information and reservations call the Echo at 231-1232.

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