

Just entertainment

The play's the thing: An interview with Robert Chesley

"This is a time, for heaven's sake, when the nation needs to talk frankly and bluntly about sex. I find myself at odds with the premise that children should know nothing about sex."

— Robert Chesley

BY HOWIE BAGGADONUTZ

By the time you read this Robert Chesley's play *Jerker* will have ended its successful run in Portland. However, don't think you've heard the last of *Jerker*. The play, about two men's phone-sex relationship in the era of AIDS, is currently at the center of what will ulti-

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mately be a landmark decision that will affect what we hear on our radios for years to come.

In April the FCC went after L.A. radio station KPFK for alleged obscenity violations because it aired sexually explicit segments from an L.A. production of *Jerker*. The case has been referred to the Justice Department and a verdict won't be reached for months. Yet, a wave of fear has overtaken the radio industry, in particular, smaller, poorer community stations like Portland's KBOO, which could theoretically go broke defending themselves against Big Brother. Yes, all this fuss because of a modest gay play that, ironically, many people now know about but have never seen — to date there've been only three productions of *Jerker*.

I recently spoke with playwright Robert Chesley about *Jerker*, AIDS, obscenity, the FCC and gay theatre. What he says may shock or enrage some of the lesbian/gay community. So be it.

HB: Why did you write *Jerker*?

RC: I'm concerned about writing for the gay male community and what we're going through. *Jerker* is one of eight scripts I've written that have to do with the health

crisis as their background. It's an expression of the tragedy our community is facing and also I hope is an affirmative play; I hope it affirms gay males as a people.

HB: What's your reaction to the FCC harassment of KPFK in Los Angeles for airing portions of *Jerker*?

RC: I think it's really horrifying. This is repression by the FCC of serious sexual discussion. This is a time, for heaven's sake, when the nation needs to talk frankly and bluntly about sex. Already it's had a chilling effect on stations across our country just when we should be finally getting over the American hypocrisy about sex and start being honest about sexual matters, which is happening by and large. The country is facing up to a lot of issues that no one wanted to admit before, like the fact that a lot of children do have sex and are going to continue to have sex, so we know that the "just say no to sex" attitude is going to be lethal. The country's also facing up to the fact that clergy have sex. Roman Catholic priests are getting AIDS and not from sharing needles — and they're not all Haitian.

HB: What about people who say that this stuff is obscene and children can hear it?

RC: I find myself very much at odds with the basic premise that children should know nothing about sex, which is based on another lie that children are not sexual. I think that's extremely damaging and is another example of the fact that prudery is lethal. If parents don't want their children to hear frank sexual discussion on the radio they can turn off the radio or control their children. I think they're dead wrong and they'll probably have dead kids if they do it, but I guess that is still their right, seeing that children are still subjects of tyranny from adults.

HB: What do you think of other gay plays

that deal with AIDS?

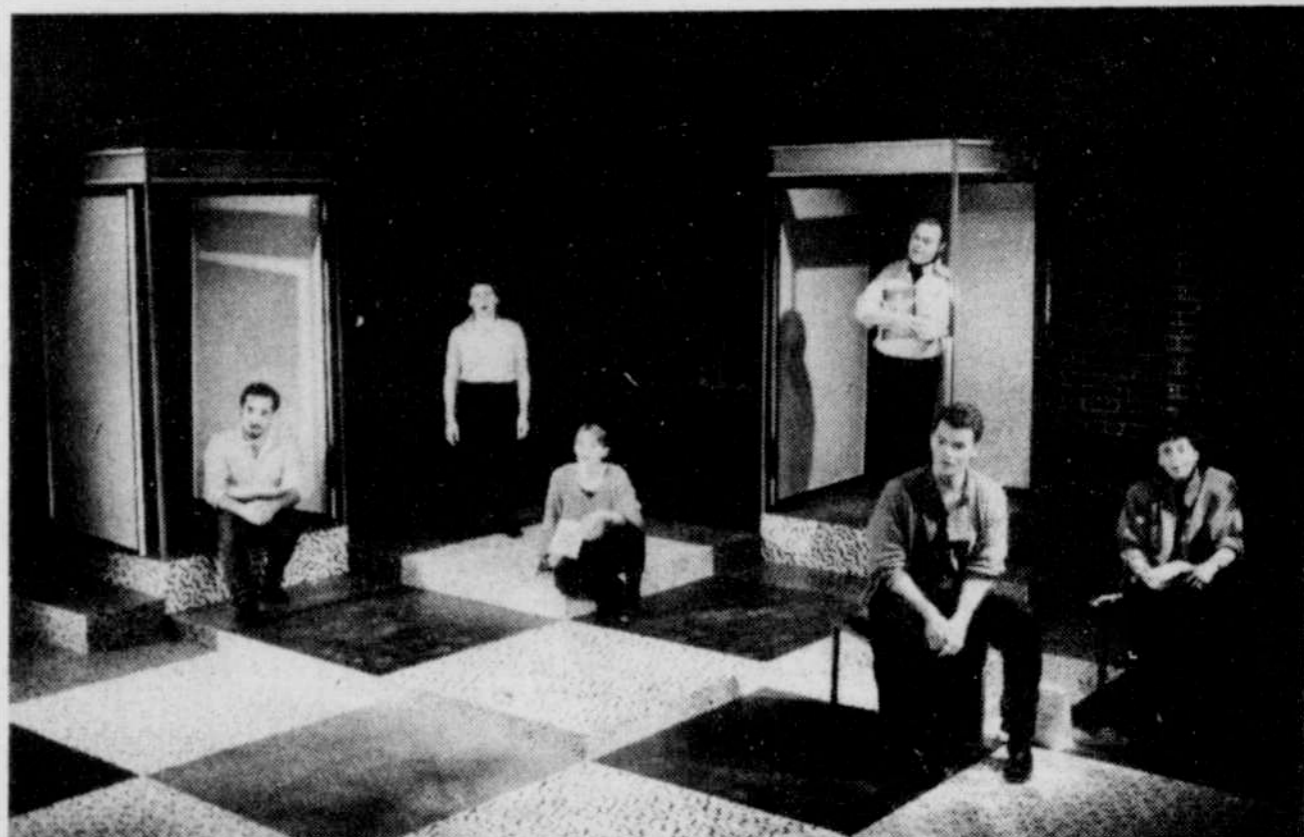
RC: I think they're all important — we're dealing with a great unknown that's going to make a big change in everyone's lives, not just the lives of gay people. I think each play cuts out its own territory. Harvey Fierstein, by the way, is pro-sexual and I agree with him. *Safe Sex* is a wonderful play that had an unfortunate [Broadway] production.

I think *The Normal Heart* was important politically for jarring people into aware-

ness. At the same time it also had a powerful anti-sexual message underlying it.

I hope *Jerker* and my other plays come from an express gay pride which I think is very important, very healthy and will save lives. We should be proud of who we are as a people and not feel ashamed of our sexual lore and knowledge.

Jerkers has been held over through July 16.



Left to right — John Mifsud, Barb Scamman, Lita Spratt, Frank Joachimsthaler, J. Stegar Thompson and Jeannie Grassi.

Intimate Friends to come to Portland

Intimate Friends, the musical revue of the gay/lesbian lifestyle, will be coming to Portland in September after ending a sold-out extended run in Seattle. The fast-paced, tasteful and sophisticated show features a cast of three men and three women who perform a wide range of characters throughout the show.

Billed as "a musical celebration of the gay and lesbian lifestyle, a joyous experi-

ence for everyone," *Intimate Friends* is the work of composer-lyricist Miriam Moses, a former New Yorker, now based in Seattle.

Intimate Friends is for everyone. Moses says, "I wanted this to be something that, if you were gay, you could bring your family to see and it would provide them with a much better explanation of who you are. This is how it feels — and it feels wonderful."

Performances in Portland are scheduled for the last two weekends in September in the new Performing Arts Center.

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