

Just entertainment

Welcome back, Chris Tanner

Tanner's new musical, *Welcome Back Bobby Dear*, takes a common experience for lesbians and gays and applies it to a straight man.

BY SANDRA DE HELEN

Family Circus Theater is back with a vengeance! This troupe toured Oregon in the early '70s with social-comment theater pieces raising audiences' consciousness on such issues as nuclear power and feminism. Then in 1979, they quietly faded away, the troupe's members spreading throughout the world. Now they're back in Portland doing politically relevant theater again. Deborah Rodney has written and directed a play about women's issues that is currently playing around town. (See June issue for review; see Calendar for next production dates.)

Chris Tanner, another original Family Circus member, has written and codirected, with Rodney, a gay country-western musical called *Welcome Back Bobby Dear*. Bobby Dear wakes up, after six months in a coma, and startles his parents with the announcement that he is straight! As he has always been very effeminate — and gay — they are dismayed and concerned about what their neighbors will think.

Chris has taken what is a common experience for lesbians and gays and applied it to a straight man. Bobby experiences the confusion, rejection and blatant disgust of family and friends that are all too well known by gay people as a part of "coming out." *Welcome Back Bobby*

Dear explores this confusion in the campy, light-hearted tradition of gay men's theater.

Chris is hoping to attract audiences from the Portland theater community, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, people of the Cascade AIDS Project, and the lesbian and gay community. The cast is made up of about half gays and half straights, and the straight people find themselves having as much fun as the gays, according to Chris.

Bobby Dear undergoes more than one transformation in the course of the play (which includes a happy ending), as has Chris in his own life. Chris developed his musical abilities while a member of Family Circus; when the troupe disbanded, he took his music to Boston. He was one of 25 men from around the country who were selected to participate in creating a men's album called *Songs of Changing Men*, which was produced by Folkways Records. While there, Chris had the enviable experience of having one of his songs, "A Sensitive Little Boy," banned in Boston.

The banning came after a hard-fought battle to get the song on the album in the first place. As so frequently happens in our community, internalized oppression very nearly eliminated this blatantly gay song from the list of songs to be produced. The group of men was made up of all races and ages, both straight and gay, all of



whom prided themselves on their social consciousness; yet some of them hoped to gain broad acceptance by eliminating the blatant from their midst. Chris won the battle, then moved on to San Francisco.

In his four and a half years in San Francisco, Chris worked as a musician, always struggling against the internalized oppression that shows up in political groups, collectives and communities as infighting, backbiting and burnout. This painful process finally drove Chris away from music and back to Portland to become a hairdresser.

Like *Bobby Dear*, this story has a happy ending. Chris has come back to theater, back to music, with a song in his heart, with his political

consciousness fully intact. In Portland, Chris has worked in video, created a movie, and now has written a "coming out" play that will make people laugh at the stereotypes society places on each other.

Chris sees his return as a reaction to the AIDS scare. He believes that at first AIDS blew the community apart, but that now we are pulling together. He sees a return to campy, light-hearted theater as a way for us to escape, to be with each other, and to salve our wounds and our pain through laughter.

So, Chris has come full circle. *Bobby Dear* promises to come full circle, and Family Circus may even consider changing its name to Full Circle. In any case, they're back!

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