

just entertainment

Dennis Bigelow —
producer/director/innovator

*OSF-Portland's new producer/director brings innovation to
the challenge of the Portland stage*

BY SANDRA DE HELEN

Dennis Bigelow is producer/director of Oregon Shakespeare Festival - Portland. He and his team of scenic, lighting and costume designers, composers and managers were charged with creating an instant institution of excellence when Ashland came to Portland two years ago. Nine plays later it appears they have succeeded.

Theatre

Bigelow is an innovative director whose mark is unmistakable (see *Burn This* in our last issue). His most recent production, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, had audiences reeling in shock as they left the theater, having just seen perhaps the most dramatic ending ever produced on a Portland stage. (On ANY stage in my experience, but I've been reviewing plays for only eight years.) He called that ending "the end of the world." And so it seemed, as the set literally broke in two, the houselights gradually brightened to thousands of watts and the six characters reappeared asking once again for an opportunity to play out their story.

In 1921 Luigi Pirandello created an existential play that questions reality and in 1990 Dennis Bigelow gave it an existential production that left audiences questioning reality. Bigelow also created controversy among the cast by omitting the curtain calls. Audiences stood waiting for the actors to reappear. But Bigelow's vision of the perfect ending allowed for no questioning of his authority on this one issue.

On all other issues, when directing a play Dennis prefers to work in collaboration with the designers, the cast, the crew. No team member is too small of inconsequential to contribute ideas for the production. He does not dictate design, but works with the designers to create the whole. This style helped create the opportunity for excellence that OSF-Portland has achieved.

Dennis Bigelow was educated at Pennsylvania State University and gained experience over the years all over the country. He has worked at everything from summer stock to two years as Mitzi Gaynor's

production manager, from Producing Director of Sacramento Theater Company, to his current position.

In Sacramento, he took over the reins of a theater company that had been in existence since the 1930s and had become something of an ivory tower. The audience was primarily over 60 years old, the budget was small, and there was no money to pay directors. In cooperation with the board of directors (whom he deems extraordinary), Dennis laid out a seven year plan. He then proceeded to direct 29 plays in five years, which put the theater in top standing in the community, allowed the board to pay off a \$500,000 note for which they had each personally signed, and (no doubt) won Bigelow his post at OSF-Portland.

Although Bigelow is gay and out, he does not consider himself political, and feels that art and politics "don't marry well." He does admit to a philosophy of live and let live, however, and does not wish to produce or direct plays that are oppressive. OSF-Portland very much wishes to attract the gay community. Bigelow himself sees the community as a large and vital force.

On a personal level, Dennis Bigelow agrees with playwright Pirandello, who said that each of us is many people inside. We are each all sides of one another. Dennis sees his being gay as only one side of the multi-faceted person he is.

Bigelow hopes to stay in Portland at least five years. He enjoys the climate, the beauty of downtown Portland, the livability of the city. As he destroyed his driver's license at age 19 and became a committed pedestrian, he appreciates the walk from his Northwest digs to his office in the Portland Performing Arts Center.

Dennis hopes to produce an AIDS or a gay play next season. He hasn't found one yet that meets OSF's criteria of literature or his own that demand no didactic politics or sentimentalization of gay relationships. With a gleam of innovation in his eye, he says Ibsen may have written the quintessential AIDS play when he wrote *Ghosts*.

Dennis Bigelow may raise the ghosts of Pirandello and Ibsen alike with his interpretation of their works. Bigelow's "end of the world" rings absolutely true to *Six Characters*. Wait until you see what Bigelow does with the ending of *Ghosts*.

NYC spoof comes to Portland

Paradykes Lost, a mystery spoof by Lisa Kron and her cronies at the WOW Cafe in New York City will open at Portland Women's Theatre Company on April 20.

Directed by newcomer Connie Breeding, *Paradykes Lost* promises to be a brainless evening of entertainment. The cast of eight includes five women new to the PWTC stage.

New faces are Shannon Chaffin (Gwendolyn), Karuna Donaldson (Amelia), Amanda Colorado (Lucretia), Jana Oppenheimer (Cecily) and Lauren Price as Chalmers Your Butler. Returning to PWTC are Cherise Milhouse (Madame St. Vincent Millay), Pat Bates (Dr. Boswell) and Linda Stewart as Dashielle the Detective.

Karuna Donaldson continues the tradition of PWTC daughters onstage, begun by Chris Carrsyn and Stormy Gale in PWTC's very first production. Karuna is the 15 year old progeny of Serena Barton who played leading roles in earlier productions.

Shannon Chaffin returns to PWTC after eight years, this time actually appearing onstage. In 1982 she was a minor, and her family decided her time would be better spent cracking the books, and she was withdrawn from the production. This time she is an adult and appears as one of the "paradykes."

Gwendolyn and Cecily are characters based on those of the same name from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Other characters are stock types from the film noir genre.

The play is set in the 1940s and is rife with love interests, twists, turns, and discoveries. Everyone has a motive for murder and only the dashing Dashielle can unravel the myriad clues.

With eight women onstage at PWTC, the things that go bump in the night may not all be as written. But the chairs have cushions and you can leave your thinking caps at home.

Paradykes runs Friday and Saturday evenings April 20 - June 2. Tickets at In Her Image Gallery, 3208 SE Hawthorne.

— Sandra de Helen

Acting Out looking for new members

Acting Out, the improvisational troupe associated with Portland Women's Theatre Company, performed for a wildly appreciative audience on International Women's Day at Portland State University. Meg Grace, Sarah Packer and Jeannie Kincaid were hilarious as they improvised scenes created with input from the audience. (Fourth member Valerie Lyon was absent that day.)

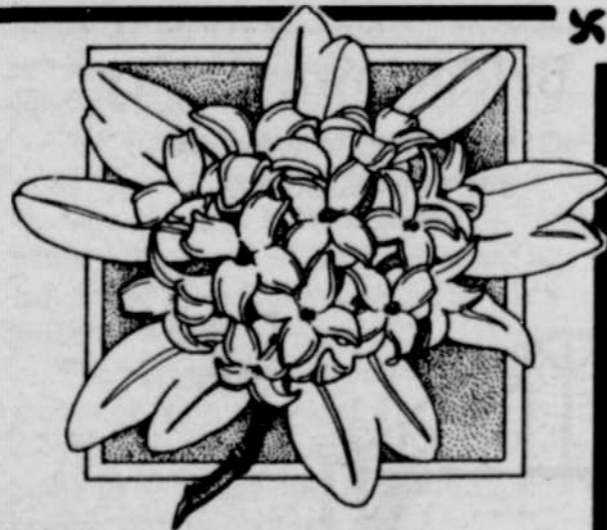
Improvisation may be the riskiest form of comedy known to humans, but Acting Out appears to be up to it. One scene in which "Meg and Jeannie ... give you their heartfelt opinions about two very important topics — selected by you," had women laughing hysterically as Meg discussed life insurance and Jeannie talked about kissing. Each woman played off the other's words (although they did not directly interact) as they lived through every emotion beginning with the audience-selected one of desperation.

Another scene had all three women delivering a lecture on "Lesbian Porcupine Sex." Each woman said only one word at a time in succession, leading to an embarrassing moment for Meg Grace when the only word she could think of was self-censored. Both the troupe and the audience were delighted at this vulnerability, and we all laughed at ourselves.

Acting Out is seeking a fifth member. They will perform a two hour show as Cafe Mocha on April 7 at 8 pm. Come see them and decide whether YOU might be the next member of this fresh and lively team.

— Sandra de Helen

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