

# Just out

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**Out About Town** is compiled as a courtesy to our readers. Performers, clubs, individuals or groups wishing to list events in the calendar should mail notices to *Just Out* by the 15th of the month preceding publication. Listings will not be taken over the telephone.

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## Steppin' Out



# P A G E T W O

## Mixed messages from the Arts Commission

*Lesbian playwright questions bias in funding*

BY CAROLYN GAGE

I just received a letter from the Oregon Arts Commission (OAC) asking that I protest the Congressional attempts to axe the National Endowment for the Arts. These attempts are a homophobic backlash from right-wingers who protested NEA funding of a gay artist. I am especially concerned with this backlash, because I am a lesbian playwright/producer who is heavily censored and physically threatened for the work I do.

In 1988 I won the Oregon Book Award for my lesbian one-woman play. I began to talk about funding for women with a number of women writers. I expressed my concern that too often the OAC panels that judge the proposals are top-heavy with men.

Although a proportionate number of women were receiving fellowships, our issue was what kind of "women's art" male judges were rewarding. I know lesbian women with grants from the OAC, but not for work about lesbians. This would be as oppressive as black or Native American artists having to write proposals for projects that did not touch on their experiences in their own cultures.

My own work addresses vehemently the violence of men and how it affects women's

lives. I also write about lesbians. My work is heavily censored by mainstream theaters. I receive threats when I produce my own work. Recently I was subjected to an eviction because of my outspoken defense of my theater, and the manager from the hall I rent was threatened with loss of business for renting to me.

My experience is that men do not respond favorably to my work. I resent that my last proposal, a musical adaptation of an international feminist bestseller by a Norwegian writer, was rejected by an all male panel. The word "lesbian" had been highlighted in the text, although I had already written it in under the categories for cultural minorities.

Several distinguished women writers and I met with a member of the OAC to discuss this situation. At the lunch, this member politely informed me that perhaps I was looking for an excuse because I was rejected. Would he have told this to four black writers whose work was being judged by white panels?

In a telephone discussion later with a different member of the OAC, I asked if he knew of any lesbian or gay art projects that had been funded by the commission. He couldn't name any. Then he said that there had been a film proposal by the man who

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Carolyn Gage

made "Mala Noche" and that it had been rejected solely on the basis of homosexual content.

In closing, this OAC staff member told me that the passage of Measure 8 was a mandate from the people of Oregon for the OAC not to fund any gay art.

In light of these experiences a year ago, I protest the fact that the OAC is publicly posturing to those on their mailing list as a commission fighting homophobic legislation when in fact, according to at least one staff member and the commission's record of not funding lesbian/gay projects, the OAC itself is implementing policies that discriminate against gays.

(This article is adapted from a letter written by Gage to Leslie Tuomi, executive director of the Oregon Arts Commission. The commission includes "sexual preference" in its statement of non-discrimination).