

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Nine Armenians, currently onstage in Seattle, looks at love, death and cha-cha lessons

by Christopher Kamera



From left: Lauren Klein, Charlotte Colavin, Julie Dretzin and Barbara Andres in Leslie Ayzavian's *Nine Armenians*

Many members of the lesbian and gay community believe that one minority can better understand another minority. With that concept in mind, it's clear that the world premiere production of Leslie Ayzavian's domestic comedy *Nine Armenians*, at the Intiman Theatre Company in Seattle, has much to offer lesbian and gay stage buffs planning on visiting The Emerald City over the Labor Day weekend.

Theater

The Intiman continues the short comedy/drama through Sept. 9.

With Ayzavian's play, the title says it all. The show is literally about nine members of an Armenian American family. Much of the humor comes from the ethnic details—the traditions, the customs, the family legends. While all of the details are authentic—and a huge turnout of the Northwest's Armenian community roared approval at the playwright's accuracy—the specifics are universally appealing. It wouldn't be wrong to call this work an Armenian *Fiddler on the Roof*, without songs. One of the show's best lines: "You whisper in Armenian, you yell in English."

While the play is a relatively simple story of a third-generation child returning to Armenia to examine her family's roots, the play is really about every aspect of living. Major themes of persecution, prejudice, life, death and love are easily balanced with everyday details about rollerblading, lace making, cha-cha lessons, the family Honda, a coffin full of birch logs, Noah's ark and a bird's nest made out of Kleenex.

Ayzavian draws on her family history for some of the characters, but she's quick to note that the play is not autobiographical. The play, originally developed last year in Intiman's New Voices play reading series, is the first work to move from the development stage to the main stage. It's also the first world premiere Intiman has staged since Warner Shook became artistic director in 1993. Intiman, widely regarded as the "Home of the Classics," is deeply committed to new authors and new plays as well as key titles in stage history.

Intiman's nine-member cast does strong work,

with the women scoring strongest in performance. The female family members certainly have the best-developed roles and lead the play through its various slice-of-life scenes. All of the cast and most of the production team is new to the Northwest, but all have strong stage credits and impressive television and film backgrounds. Many cast members, interestingly, have been involved in various productions of the Jewish-themed family comedies of Neil Simon.

Christopher Ashley, the director, is the openly gay New York director best known for staging the original off-Broadway production of *Jeffrey*. Ashley also directed the current film version, as well as productions of the play in Los Angeles and San Francisco. He guides *Nine Armenians* with a sure hand and gives a proper balance to the varied characters and scenes.

Many members of Ashley's production team have worked extensively on gay- and lesbian-themed plays in New York and regional theater.

Loy Arcenas, set designer, designed Terrence McNally's Tony winning *Love! Valor! Compassion!* and created the New York premieres of *Spic-O-Rama* and *The Baltimore Waltz*. Locally, he created the sets for Portland Opera's *The Tales of Hoffman*.

Costumer Gabriel Berry designed the world premiere opera production of *Harvey Milk* for Houston Grand Opera. She works internationally with stage and opera titles and recently won the prestigious Silver Medal for costume design at the Prague Quadrennial, the first and only person from the United States to ever win an individual award in the festival. Donald Holder, lighting designer, worked with *Eastern Standard*, *Spunk* and *Jeffrey* in their New York premiere productions.

Nine Armenians is a brisk 90-minute production with no intermission. Portland visitors would find the show a perfect thank-you treat for Emerald City hosts. During Seattle's Bumbershoot, a traditional Labor Day arts celebration, performances Sept. 2 and 3 are free with a Bumbershoot admission.

Ticket information is available by calling Intiman's box office, (206) 626-0782. Ask about student and senior discounts. Intiman also offers a last-minute half-price rush ticket 10 minutes before curtain.

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