

PHOTO BY RICK ADAMS

From left: Michael Mendelson, Cristine McMurdo-Wallis and Cameron Watson in Portland Center Stage's *Comfort and Joy*

AN L.A. (XMAS) STORY

Cozy up to the wit and 80-degree warmth of a gay couple's first holiday with the folks

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.

Yes, it's Christmastime again. It's time to rally around those holiday traditions and tap into the collective Yuletide euphoria. For most of us, this encompasses flocking to such perennial diversions as *The Nutcracker* and Handel's *Messiah*. But for those more adventurous souls desperate to break out of their *It's a Wonderful Life* routine, Portland Center Stage is offering theatergoers an unconventional entry into the slew of holiday entertainment possibilities.

Theater

The commissioned play *Comfort and Joy*, by Jack Heifner, promises to be the production most likely to reveal some of the season's concealed absurdities and hopefully add some heat to the proverbial chestnut-infested fire.

Elizabeth Huddle, artistic director for PCS, has taken on a brave challenge with the commissioning of *Comfort and Joy*, for the play features a homosexual couple in the central roles—a subject that conservative viewers may find objectionable. Huddle is faced with a delicate dilemma that frequently confronts artistic directors of theater companies: Do you risk upsetting a subscriber base (significantly influenced by the tenets of a more conventional contingent) to produce important works that may have a provocative political or social commentary? Huddle's answer is yes. She has dedicated herself to a project that may raise a few eyebrows, or leave a few vacant seats after intermission, but she is determined to stir things up a bit, in hopes that the OCA may begin to lose its grip upon Oregon political perspectives.

As the playwright of a commissioned piece, Jack Heifner feels as if he has shouldered a certain amount of the responsibility concerning the success of the show. Heifner is used to seeing his shows performed in more intimate theatrical settings, and even though his off-Broadway play *Vanities* ran for four and a half years, he finds the task of filling a 900-seat theater nightly somewhat

daunting. This hasn't affected the content of the script, however. Heifner expects that this play will upset some people, but he finds it more important to say what needs to be said. He wishes the play to express as little bias as possible, preferring to "present as many sides of the argument as I can." He has promised that no one will be spared in the production.

Heifner chose the setting of Los Angeles for *Comfort and Joy* and has unofficially subtitled it his "Revenge on L.A." play. As a resident of Los Angeles for the past several years (he is on his way back to New York via Texas), he has concluded that "nothing makes sense in Los Angeles," and, since this is a play about inappropriate behavior, Christmas in L.A.'s 80-degree heat offers the perfect setting. The facade of Hollywood ideologies and their influence upon the country's collective consciousness is fertile ground for a playwright who wishes to expose artifice. Heifner promises to re-examine our perceptions of family, home, and the "picture-postcard Christmases" that we have all been told to expect.

When Heifner began writing *Comfort and Joy* he knew that he wanted more than a "bedroom farce" fate for the play. He wanted to accomplish a political comedy that engages serious issues using methods that continue to pull the audience back to laughter. The added influence of a mean fairy to the plot fuels the comedy and enables the action to progress in a nonlinear

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way—a device recently employed in the successful gay-themed Broadway productions of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

With the combined efforts of Jack Heifner, director Cliff Baker (who has directed Heifner's past five shows), PCS's impressive production team and a cast of talented actors, all working together to bring to life Elizabeth Huddle's conception, *Comfort and Joy* will undoubtedly be the most talked-about holiday affair since "The Living Christmas Tree."

Comfort and Joy runs Dec. 8-30 at PCPA's Intermediate Theatre (previews are Dec. 2-7). Tickets are \$11-\$33, call (503) 274-6588.

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