

THEATER

Blacks in Blues

Continued from the cover

Tell me about the Portland production of this play.

Blues for an Alabama Sky is a huge, costume- and prop-heavy show. I change clothes every time I leave the stage—14 times!

How do you prepare for shows?

It depends on my level of fear and anxiety and the character. For this show, I didn't know what was going on in the gay community during the Harlem Renaissance. I learned how vibrant, prevalent and alive it was. It was amazing the amount of work that those individuals produced, and the regard in which they were held was extraordinary.

The play is set in 1930. Why was Harlem so alive at that time?

I was just reading the other day about the night life, the parties, the venues—it was incredible. White patrons and the mafia filled Harlem with lots of money. There was a sudden interest in fine art that African Americans were creating. It became very vogue and fashionable. Many of those artists had white, moneyed patrons. That's how the art got out to America and the rest of the world.

How many people are in the show?

The two central characters are Guy and Angel [a blues and jazz singer]. They're best friends. They were both prostitutes in Savannah, Georgia, and they moved up to Harlem as part of the great migration after World War I. In all, the play has two women and three men, all African Americans.

What is the play about?

It's about dreams.

What is your character's dream?

Guy cannot abide living in a country that does not value him first of all as a black human being, second as a homosexual, and third as an artist. So it's his agenda to move to Paris and design clothes for Josephine Baker. That's his dream.

What's wonderful about Guy?

He's this openly gay, nonapologetic, terribly practical, well-centered, well-rounded, straightforward, witty, funny, charming, strong, passionate, central character who happens to be gay... a character with a voice that is close to my own.

What is it about Guy's character that you admire most?

His fearlessness. He gets bashed, but it doesn't break his stride. He's out of work, but he still lives as though he were living in Paris drinking champagne. His best friend says and does some pretty despicable things to him, but he's very forgiving. And finally, his courage. To be that well-adjusted is what I love. I get to



Angel (Cynthia Jones) and Guy (Timothy McCuen Piggee) share a laugh

inhabit someone for two and a half hours that is supremely well-adjusted.

What's Guy's flaw?

He's perfect. You want him to be your friend more than anyone—if I only knew that man. I only hope to lead a life as clear as that character's. He's a survivor. Being black in this society, particularly at that time, it was hard; he had to survive.

Why an "Alabama sky"?

There's a young man who shows up on the scene from Alabama who initiates the play's complication.

What do you still have to do to get ready for the show?

Guy had a conch. I might have to have my hair relaxed if I can't find the right wig. Guy is a designer. So he's not about to be out of fashion. He was very much the vanguard of fashion. It was relaxed. You looked like Billy D. Williams or Cab Calloway or Duke Ellington or Langston Hughes. They'd use lye or other chemicals on their hair.

Do you like your job?

I adore my job. I'm the luckiest man in the world. I'm also a full-time faculty member at Cornish School of the Arts in Seattle. I teach text analysis and audition techniques. It's great to have some impact on a student's life. I'm instantly a part of something very ancient—it's the gift that you must give back. I love it.

Make your sales pitch to potential theatergoers.

You have an opportunity to see and learn something you don't often get a chance to see... How often do you get to actually see a positive portrayal of a gay character in a lead role? You'll get to hear Josephine Baker's music, you'll get to listen to Duke Ellington, and you get to submerge yourself in a time period and subject matter that you may not know. This play is terribly witty and funny, it's fun to watch, and it's beautiful to look at. Karen Gjelsteen's set is phenomenal, and Jeff Cone's costumes are amazing. If you're gay in Portland and you don't come to see this show, you've truly missed out. It's for you, for crying out loud! That's why I hope the GALA night is really well attended. I think it's an opportunity for Portland to come

out and support something that is wonderful, positive.

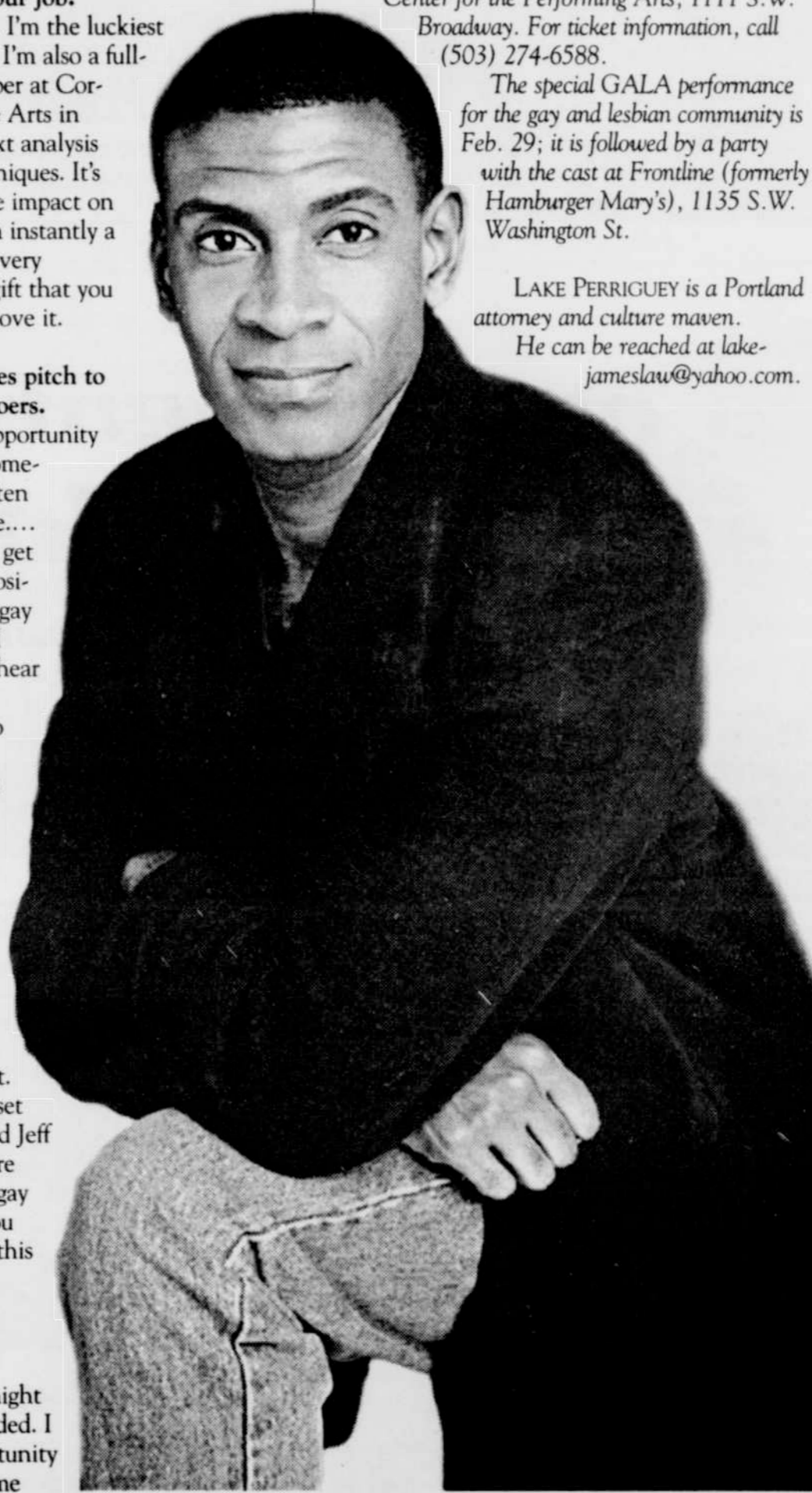
And you get to see Timothy Piggee, who looks damn good!

■ *BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY* previews Feb. 19 through 24, opens Feb. 25 and runs through March 18 in the Newmark Theatre of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts, 1111 S.W. Broadway. For ticket information, call (503) 274-6588.

The special GALA performance for the gay and lesbian community is Feb. 29; it is followed by a party with the cast at Frontline (formerly Hamburger Mary's), 1135 S.W. Washington St.

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