

**THEATER**

In most plays the costumes are meant to draw little attention, except to mark the personal style of the characters and the era. The maxim doesn't hold true, however, in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, the Portland Center Stage production that ends its run March 18. This glorious look at the lives of five African Americans in prohibition-era Harlem has as its main character a flashy gay man, who just happens to be a costume designer for the Cotton Club and diva Josephine Baker. But for the onstage designer (played to exquisite perfection by Timothy Piggee) to wear and exhibit his creations, the costume shop manager for PCS had first to envision them.

Enter designer Jeff Cone, a muscular, bearded bear whose towering size leads one to envision him as a football star more than a costumer. In fact, Cone is the son of an ex-Green Bay Packer and Hall of Famer. (His earliest memory, he says, is of "my father taking me by the hand and taking me into the Green Bay Packers locker room. I remember all these enormous naked men all around me!")

Growing up, Cone had little interest in the game of football himself.

"I was a big old disappointment," he notes with a grin. "I have home movies of me in a miniature Packers uniform with a helmet and all that stuff. I looked totally perplexed. I had not an inkling of interest in sports."

Instead, his interest was in art, and his talent was supported by his grandfather, a commercial artist. After attending Clemson University and studying psychology, acting and costume design, Cone was accepted into the University of South Carolina on the strength of his graphic design portfolio.

The head of the theater department offered me a graduate assistantship if I would major in theater," Cone recalls. "The good thing about the assistantship is that I designed shows and realized those designs. It wasn't all class projects. In my case, I produced almost everything that I designed. I learned all about making patterns, how to make costumes fit a particular body and how to make them look like the costume sketch."

During his college days, Cone was outed to his parents by his sister, who is—ironically—now a closeted lesbian herself, he says.

"I believe she is closeted because she saw the incredible trauma that occurred when she outed me," he says.

After his parents confronted him about his homosexuality, Cone was cut off from all contact with and support from his family, a situation that continued for 10 years. The turning point in their relationship came after his mother helped care for a cousin dying of AIDS.



## Designing man

A profile of Portland Center Stage costume designer Jeff Cone

BY ANDY MANGELS

"I think that made my mom think," he says. "We have a cordial, strained relationship now."

Cone was also involved in gay politics at USC, part of a group of students who sued the college to establish a gay student alliance.

"We went to federal court, and the judge ruled that they had to let us do that. We were setting precedents" he recalls, noting with a smile that "nobody really knew what to do with me."

He became the first student in the college's history to graduate with a master of fine arts degree in theater.

Toward his goal of working in professional theater, Cone applied for a job with Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, a major regional group. Although hired as a journeyman in the costume shop, after he showed his portfolio to the artistic director Cone was given the opportunity to design the costumes for Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. He also worked on

Pearl Cleage's first play, *Flyin' West*, and later helped costume her second show, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (with Phylicia Rashad).

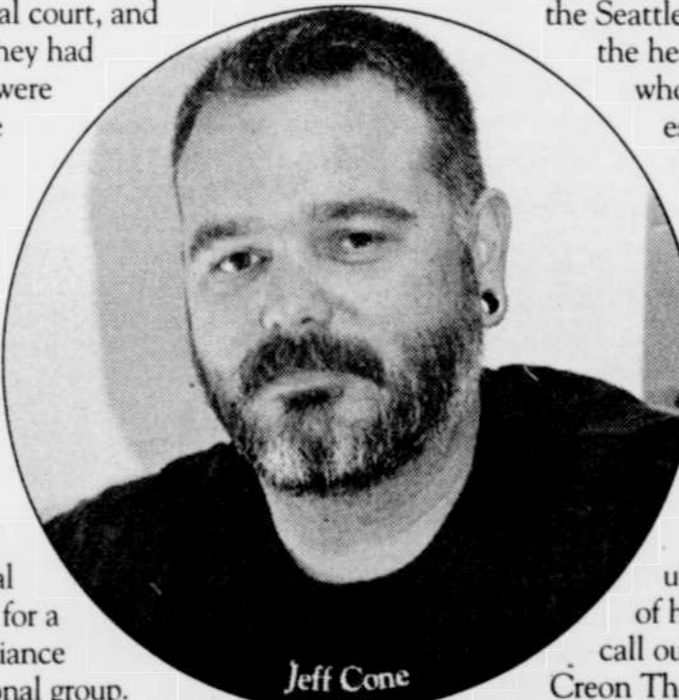
After 10 years designing 25 productions in Atlanta, Cone accepted an offer from the Seattle Opera. He became

the head "cutter" (the person who patterns and supervises the construction of costumes) as well as the costume coordinator for several shows. He didn't work on any designs, however; he "was taking a little creative rejuvenation time."

Shortly after the costume shop went union and Cone lost all of his benefits, he got a call out of the blue from Creon Thorne, the production manager for Portland Center Stage,

asking him if he would consider the position of costume shop manager.

As part of the enticement to take the job, Thorne offered Cone the costume design job



Jeff Cone

on *Bus Stop*, the fourth play in PCS's 1999-2000 season.

"I was ready to design again," says Cone.

Once he got to Portland, he was excited to also be offered the design job on *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. The show has changed substantially since its world premiere in Atlanta, and it's a costume designer's dream. *Blues* has 25 costumes, 12 of which are worn by Timothy Piggee.

"I gave Timothy's character the burden of showing the passage of time, since he's in virtually every single scene, and most scenes take place on different days," Cone explains. "I decided [that], as a flamboyant gay costume designer who dresses in an eccentric fashion, we could rationalize him having a large wardrobe. He changes his shirt, neckwear and vest in every scene."

The strong colors of Piggee's wardrobe also show that he stands out from the crowd, even in 1930s Harlem. The costumes are all designed for quick removal, with snaps and Velcro fasteners holding them in place onstage.

Cone is emphatic that he couldn't accomplish his work without the exceptional staff at PCS.

"I have a craftsman, a cutter, two stitchers, a wardrobe person and a wig person on staff. I make sure they have everything they need to bring the costume designs to fruition and allow the show to run," he explains.

With the season's final production, *Gunshy*, opening in late March—and his imminent visit to the Seattle Opera to work on its summer season megaproduction of *Ring of the Nibelung*—Cone has already discussed his return for next year's PCS season. He will be designing next season's fourth show, *Closer*, and the final show, *A New Brain* (the new gay-themed musical from the author of *Falsettos*). He's also enthusiastically optimistic.

"We have a new artistic director, Chris Coleman, who's out and gay. He's brilliant, both theatrically and generally speaking, and I'm feeling like for the first time in my life I'm in the right place at the right time," Cone says. "I'm excited to be working with and designing at PCS. Time will tell, but I feel like the potential for really exciting, life-affecting theater...the potential is there. I'm really looking forward to the future."

■ ANDY MANGELS is a longtime entertainment writer with three books plus hundreds of comic books and magazine articles to his credit. You can write him at AMangelsSW@aol.com.



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