

THEATER

Boys to men

Queer characters abound in a new production of *Falsettos*

BY ANDY MANGELS

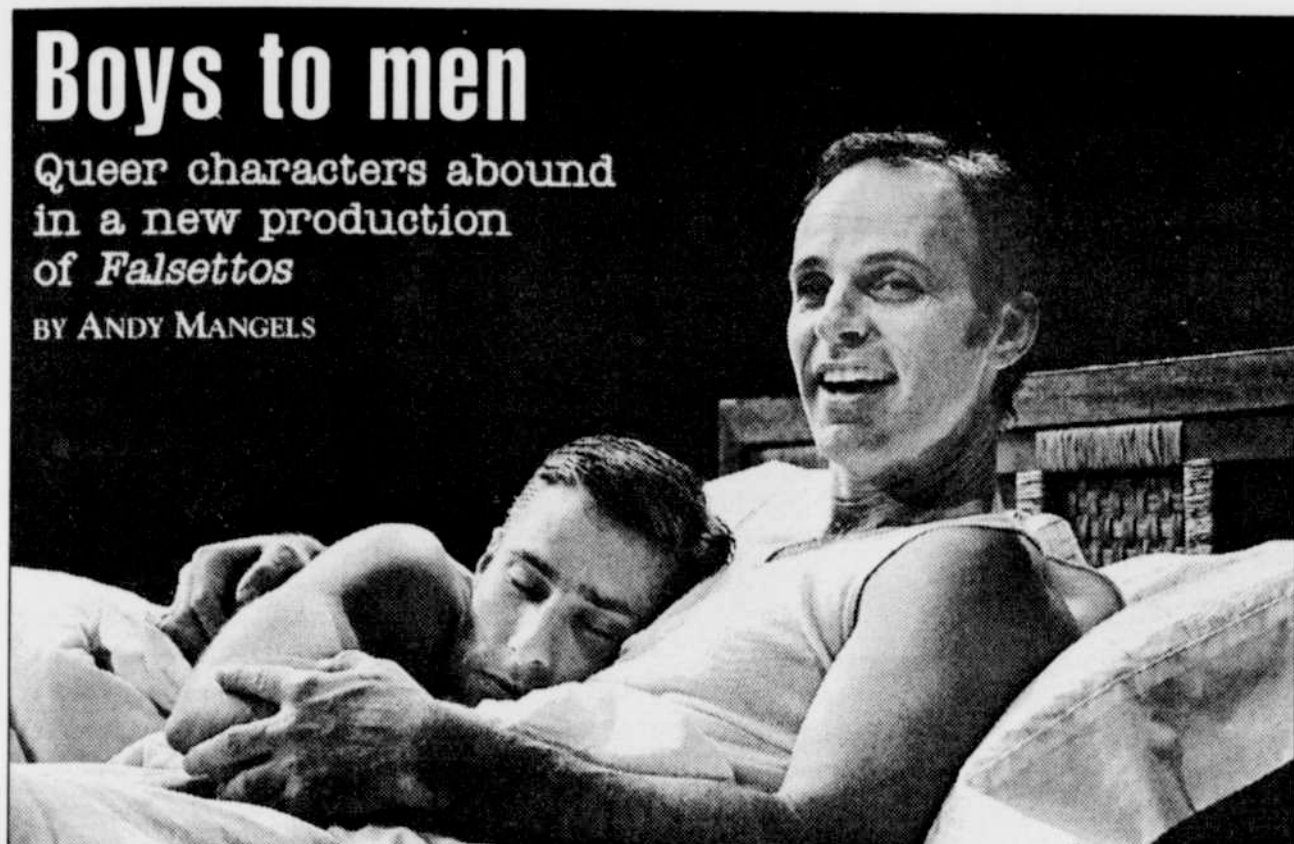


PHOTO BY RICK ADAMS

Dale Johannes (left) and Dave Cesana snuggle up in *Falsettos*

It's rare that an audience at a stage musical actually has to pay close attention to every lyric to understand the story—rarer still that the spectators must also dodge chopped carrots and a bitten-in-half banana.

Both these things are true of *Falsettos*, the newest musical from Portland-based Triangle Productions. The play is based on the Tony-winning 1992 Broadway show, which is actually a marriage of two one-act shows, *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*.

Triangle producer Don Horn also presented *Falsettos* in 1994, when beloved Portland actor Rob Buckmaster played Whizzer, one of the lead roles. Buckmaster's death from AIDS complications in 1995 lends a bittersweet air to the mounting of this show, and the new production is dedicated to him.

Falsettos follows the life of Marvin (David Cesana), a selfish Jewish man who comes out late in life. In 1979, he has left his frustrated wife, Trina (Jennifer Niederloh), and his chess-loving son, Jason (Paul Early), and become lovers with the slightly vain Whizzer (Dale Johannes). Complications ensue when Marvin's psychiatrist, Mendel (Kregg Arnston), begins treating, then dating Trina. By the end of the first act, Trina and Mendel are a couple, and Jason is trying to reconcile his feelings for his father, his father's lover and the new father figure.

The second act picks up in 1981, introducing the lesbian Dr. Charolette (Sue Ellen Christensen) and her lover, Cordelia (Julie Barber), a kosher caterer. Jason's bar mitzvah is approaching, and everyone is trying to control it. Everyone, that is, except Whizzer, who has re-entered the group's lives but soon shows signs that he is suffering from the mysterious and fatal new malady striking gay men.

Written by William Finn and James Lapine, *Falsettos* demands close attention from the first note of the first song. Lapine is a past collaborator of noted musical wordsmith Stephen Sondheim, and since the two acts are almost entirely sung, you can feel the Sondheim influence in the tricky phrasings and rhythms. The first act is especially dense, with stretches of time and important events encapsulated in brief lyrical references. The second act has a more coherent and clear story line.

It should be noted that this density is apparently intended, as the whole story is truly about the son, Jason, and his journey, not necessarily about his often unlikable father. When Jason finally begins making his own decisions instead of allowing the bickering adults to make them for him, he brings those around him closer together. Indeed, the title of the play is a refer-

ence to men acting like boys, which enhances the experience of watching as the true boy begins to act like a man.

The cast is a pleasure to watch and listen to overall, with young Paul Early performing well, especially in the more difficult second act. David Cesana does his best with a role that isn't entirely likable, and he delivers an emotional ending song. Standouts in the cast are Jennifer Niederloh, whose aforementioned carrot-and-banana song, "I'm Breaking Down," brings down the house in Act I; and Dale Johannes—a dead ringer for Comedy Central's Jon Stewart—who is emotionally engaging even when not saying a word and is an excellent singer to boot.

When Jason finally begins making his own decisions instead of allowing the bickering adults to make them for him, he brings those around him closer together. Indeed, the title of the play is a reference to men acting like boys, which enhances the experience of watching as the true boy begins to act like a man.

Staging by director Dennis Bigelow and musical director Bill Wells is strong, with a four-piece band backing the set, unobtrusive but visible. *Falsettos* is another winner for Triangle Productions, but patrons are warned to pay close attention, bring a hanky for the emotional scenes, and watch out for flying food groups.

Triangle Productions' next show will be *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, a queer retelling of the Bible starting with the story of Adam and Steve and their lesbian sisters, Jane and Mabel. Donald Horn will direct this play, which is written by Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey, In & Out*, *Addams Family Values*). *Most Fabulous* opens May 24 and plays through June 24.

■ *FALSETTOS* plays May 19 through 26 at the World Trade Center Auditorium, 121 S.W. Salmon St. in Portland. Tickets are \$20-\$23 from the box office, (503) 239-5919, or from Fastixx.

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



Second Nature

HOME & GARDEN CENTER



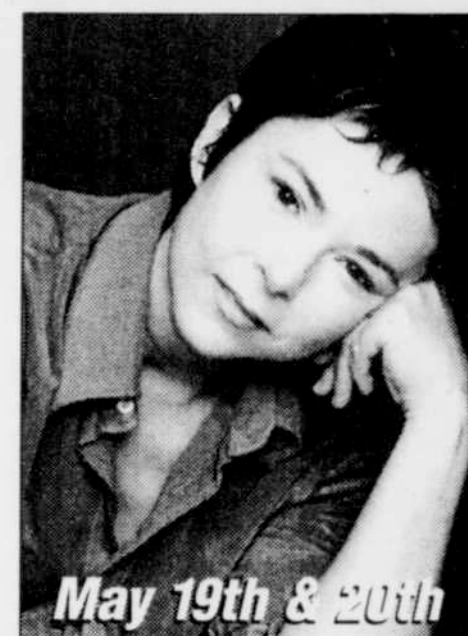
*Bring in this ad and receive 10% OFF all perennials through May 31, 2000.

We feature

- Annuals
- Shrubs & Trees
- Garden Accessories
- European Baskets
- Cut Flowers
- Keepsake Gifts
- Perennials
- Hanging Baskets
- Statuary
- Vases and Lamps
- Pottery
- Free Gift Wrap

8601 SW Terwilliger Blvd.
(next to the Chevron station)
503.977.6545

Margaret Smith
at Harvey's Comedy Club!



May 19th & 20th

Tonight & Tomorrow!

Five Shows ONLY:
\$15 Per Person



All shows non-smoking.
Tickets on sale now. Order by Phone.
Call 241-0338 for reservations.
436 NW 6th at Glisan



PORTLAND GAY MEN'S CHORUS
PORTLAND LESBIAN CHOR
BRIDGES VOCAL ENSEMBLE Presents

**"Gala!
Gala!"**

Three Great Chorus!
One Great Concert!
Don't miss the show as
Portland's three premier
gay choruses come together in a
concert of pride and musical accomplishment!

Sat., July 15, 2000 • 8:00 p.m.
Sun., July 16, 2000 • 7:00 p.m.

PCC Sylvania Performing Arts Center
12000 SW 49th Avenue, Portland

Tickets \$20/\$15/\$12
FASTIXX 224-TIXX



WWW.PDXGMC.ORG