

Equal time

Just Out gives Portland critic a chance to clear the overheated air

BY ORIANA GREEN

I think it's gotten dramatically out of hand" is how *Willamette Week* theater critic Steffen Silvis begins our interview. He's referring to the tempest in a barbecue that's been heating in recent months concerning his feud with Don Horn's triangle productions! company.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding. I don't deny the fact that I called the grant organizations. As far as I'm concerned, that falls within the boundaries of criticism. I did not call to have the grants rescinded.... I did not ask for them to reconsider the grants," he says emphatically.

Earlier this year, Horn received multiple grants totaling almost \$100,000 for triangle, and Silvis became incensed.

"My concerns were basically aesthetic concerns. I'm not a great fan of triangle productions! ...I find a lot of it shallow and derivative," Silvis explains.

He lists among his complaints poor acting and directing (except when Horn employs a guest director) as well as questionable choice of material. Silvis describes triangle plays as "dinner-theater quality without the diversion of dinner."

He does, however, point out that he has on rare occasions found some merit in their work. He cites *Lesbian Vampires of Sodom* as a play he enjoyed, calling it a "fun romp."

"It's not that I want triangle to disappear; I certainly think there's a place for triangle in the scheme of things. What I'd like to see is triangle improve," Silvis explains. "For me, to receive an award of \$100,000 sends a mixed message to the theater community.... I think Mr. Horn thinks he is producing great professional theater, but I don't think any description of professional could actually fit what goes on there.... Within the theater community itself, triangle is sometimes considered a bit of a joke. The majority of the plays tend to be focused on low sex farces, something titillating."

Silvis thinks it's demoralizing for other struggling companies to "see work that is substandard be so richly rewarded. I know too many artists in this town who are struggling. I go to too many theaters that would love \$1,000, let alone \$100,000, to keep them on their feet...so it seems like it's part of my job to watch how grant money is given."

Responding to Horn's fear of a vendetta

against him, Silvis says, "I suppose I can understand that he would be nervous if he was given \$100,000 and he heard that someone was asking questions."

Silvis also refutes the accusation that he contacted and complained to any of the companies that license plays to triangle, although he does admit he has suggested in print more than once that such an action might have merit. He claims an actor from triangle's recent production of *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* contacted him, upset because Horn had tampered with the script of Paul Rudnick's play to effectively erase the subplot dealing with AIDS.

"I thought this was a very serious charge," Silvis says, adding that a discussion with a colleague who had seen the play confirmed the accusation. (Silvis has been banned by Horn from triangle plays for some time.) So in his calendar listing, Silvis mentioned the omission and wrote, "I wonder what Dramatists Play Service would say about this."

Someone did contact the company, but Silvis insists it wasn't him. "I think he's [Horn] on some kind of probation now because of it," Silvis adds. (Horn was contacted for this article but declined to respond, other than to say, "I really think this bickering just needs to end.")

Silvis also thinks some of Horn's dissatisfaction with him stems from an inability to distinguish between a calendar listing and a review.

"To me, the entire institution is rather hypocritical...in his mission statement he [Horn] declares that he is running the largest avant-garde theater in the Northwest...well, most of it is passé."

As a gay man, Silvis doesn't believe in supporting Portland's only theater company devoted to gay-themed work just because it's queer. "Surely it's for all of our best interest to have good theater, and as homosexuals it would also behoove us to have good gay theater. But I'm

not seeing that at triangle."

Only one other exception comes to his mind: "Three years ago he did *Angels in America*, and as far as I'm concerned that's the last serious gay play that he's done."

Silvis is also worried that many lowbrow triangle plays send the wrong message. "I scan his audience sometimes, and I see a lot of white suburbanites from Gresham who are slumming at some titillating theater...and you're perpetuating gay stereotypes, which I find personally offensive."

The challenge Silvis continues to issue to Horn is: "Why aren't we seeing some really valid gay work that's addressing our issues now? I don't think he's truly serving us...there's a wealth of good gay playwrights and plays out there that Portlanders are ignorant of because

no one has the nerve to stage them."

Silvis began his career as a theater critic just four years ago and jokes, "I've been causing death and destruction ever since." Then he counters with, "I think I've given every theater company in town at least one good review."

But after all the dissection is over, Silvis sees himself as a consumer advocate, asking himself, "Was this evening worth \$25 or not?"

Silvis does have a good sense of humor about himself and his role as a pariah in the theater community. "I come from a long background of Jewish scholars and Presbyterian ministers...so I feel like I'm constantly communing with the prophets, damning here, damning there. I have not made a lot of friends here in the theater community...but I think it's part of my job to not make friends."

So what about the notorious Web site, the "Steffen Silvis Bashing Room," where he posts his own replies to his naysayers? "I respond to them. I think it's healthy for critics to have critics." That site is now defunct, but the conversation continues among the actors on the message board at www.theatrevertigo.org.

The "Bashing Room" was also a forum for an ongoing dialogue about triangle. To one writer who posted a defense of Horn, Silvis wrote, "How undemocratic to

voice the opinion that someone who directs his nude actors to swing their cocks toward the audience if they look bored may not be furthering the cause of theater in Portland."

Silvis also manages a chuckle over *The Oregonian*, which that very morning had shot a poison dart at him: "At times, the theater community seemed to put more energy into dishing out Internet potshots at a secondary drama critic than into its performances." Displaying some humility, he agrees—"I think they wanted to stress the fact that at the end of the day I'm probably not that important, which is probably the God's honest truth."

He pauses to laugh again, then adds: "But did they have to broadcast it? My mother reads that rag!" **JO**

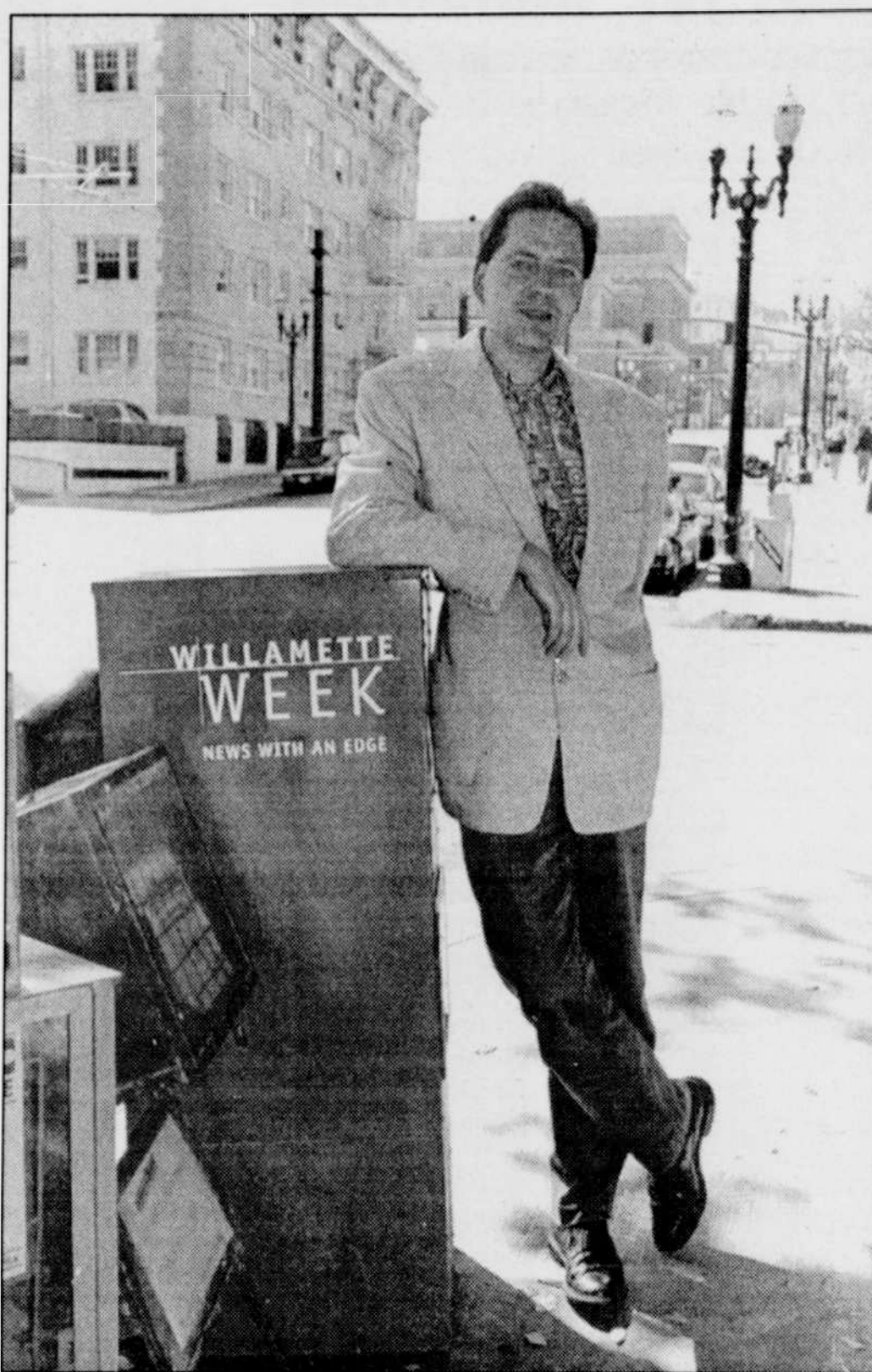


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Steffen Silvis

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