

Since he was a child, Chris Coleman knew in his heart of hearts what he wanted to be when he grew up: a Baptist missionary.

A true believer, he chose Baylor University in Texas as a way of fulfilling his spiritual calling. Then he fell in love with a man. Oops.

Renouncing his faith, Coleman took all of his religious fervor and channeled it into his other love: theater. From the time he and a sixth-grade classmate wrote, directed and starred in a musical version of the Civil War (complete with production number about Fort Sumter), he has shown an aptitude for creating dynamic theater.

In 1988, he returned to his native Atlanta to found his own theater company, Actors' Express, whose first home was in a building behind a strip mall and across the street from—you guessed it—a Baptist church. In this unlikely setting, his company began to explore the spiritual territory that religion won't venture near, giving life, he says, "to stories that bring us closer to the mysteries at the center of our lives."

Some of that exploration involved nudity on stage (oops again!), and the company lost its lease. But under Coleman's tireless commitment, Actors' Express grew from a budget of zero to \$700,000 and garnered excitement from critics and audiences alike.

After overseeing more than 33 productions, he felt he had pushed every envelope he could and had bucked every trend. The time had come to move on.

The motion implied in the name Actors' Express speaks to Coleman's theatrical philosophy. Admitting a "low tolerance for boredom," the wiry and intense artistic director promises to stir things up in his new role at the heretofore-conservative Portland Center Stage.

"So much in our culture puts us to sleep," he says. "When I go to the theater, I want to sit forward. I want the experience onstage to breathe with life, to grab me by the scruff of the neck and hold my attention."

The play's the thing

But in a culture that seems impervious to shock, how can Coleman possibly hope to wake us up? By letting theater do what theater does best: engaging our imaginations. Noting that American theater has been stuck for the past 100 years trying to compete with the cinematic experience by replicating it, Coleman looks to European theater, which uses a distinctly theatrical vocabulary, for his inspiration.

The missionary's position

There's nothing routine about the new season at Portland Center Stage

BY MARC ACITO

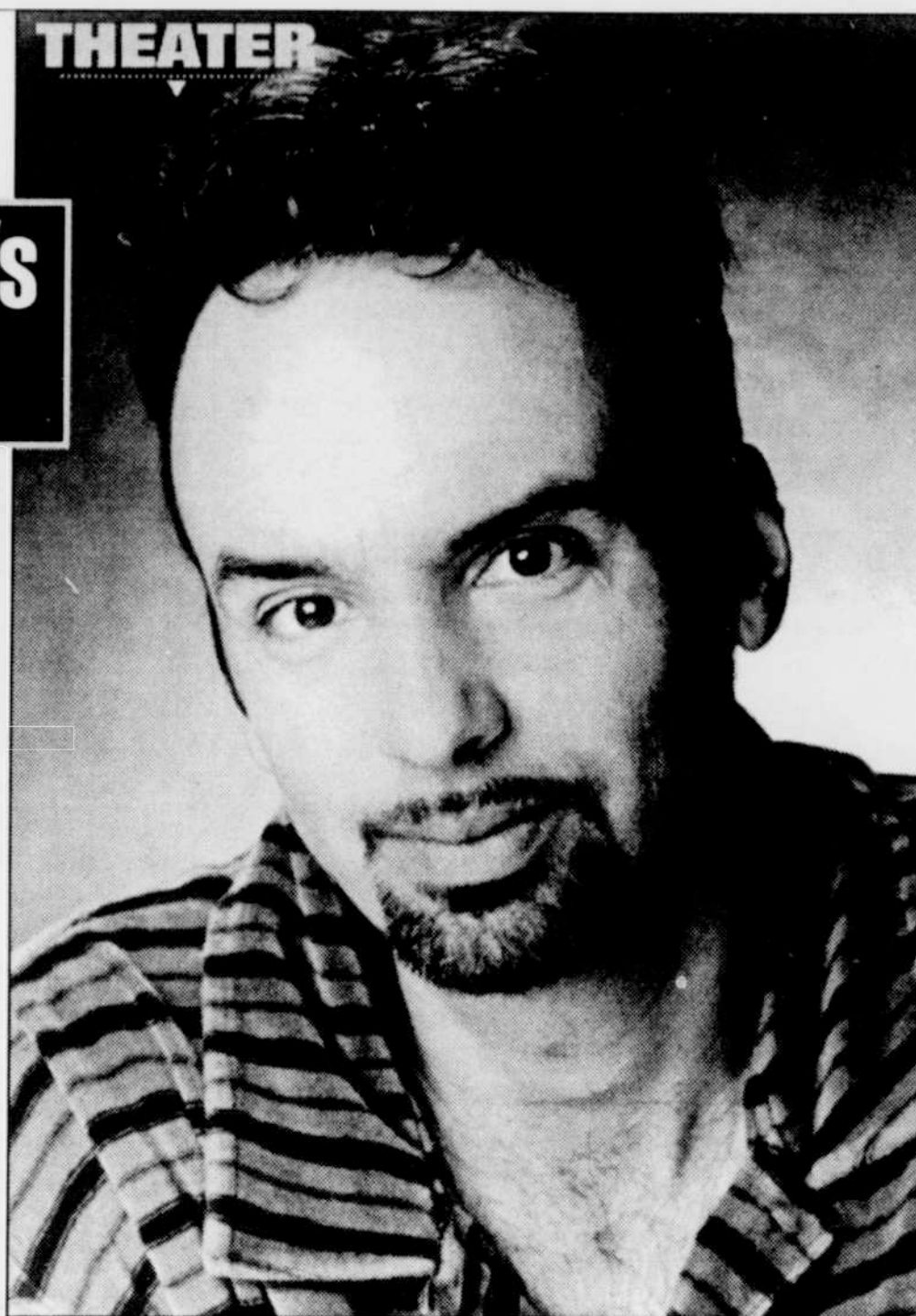
"Films and television are photographs. They have to look real. In the theater, you can stand on a bare stage and say, 'I'm crossing the river now,' and the audience will take that journey with you. You can see *Raiders of the Lost Ark* 10 times, and nothing you do sitting in the audience will affect Harrison Ford's performance—but in the theater, there's a real give and take between audience and performer that changes the energy of the performance. Most people don't pay attention to the other people in the audience at a movie, but a theater audience sniffs out each other's mood. It's a communal experience."

Coleman promises to provide a sweeping emotional experience, one that takes the audience to extremes. Portland Center Stage's 2000-2001 season kicks off with *The Devils*, an explosive adaptation of the Dostoevsky novel *The Possessed*. Coleman originated the production in Atlanta, where it proved so popular, dozens of people had to be turned away each night.

The season also boasts the sublime (a radical retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone*) and the ridiculous (the irreverent Irish farce *The Cripple of Inishmaan*) as well as the company's first-ever musical, *A New Brain*, another nutty and neurotic gay-themed show from the Tony Award-winning composer of *Falsettos*.

At first, Coleman didn't think Portland was ready for his edgy style. "All I knew about Oregon was the anti-gay measures," he says.

So, when Portland Center Stage's board asked him during the interview process to submit a three-year plan, Coleman deliberately wrote down a wish list of the most provocative, outrageous stuff he could think of, telling them in no uncertain terms, "Do not hire me unless you're ready to support the work I do." Sensing the community's hunger for something fresh and exciting, the board backed Coleman's



vision and hired him—and even will allow him to transform the company's seasonal mounting of *A Christmas Carol* from its usual Hallmark card to the more haunting ghost story atmosphere of the original novel.

"You may be challenged, but you won't be bored," Coleman says. "You will be engaged. You will be entertained."

A man for all seasons

The breadth of the season reflects Coleman's universal outlook on life as well as his job. In the few short months he's been here, he's made a sincere effort to connect with Portland's community, gay and otherwise.

Whether talking to the head of the Portland Chamber of Commerce about urban growth or speaking to PABA, Portland's unofficial Gay Chamber of Commerce, about gay support for the arts, Coleman has, with the help of the Center Stage board, enrolled in his own intensive Portland Immersion Program. "Never have I met so many people in such a short time," he says.

But it's more than rubber chicken lunches. To be an effective artistic voice here, Coleman understands the need to connect with the community. He enjoys living and working in the heart of downtown and appreciates

Portland's "earthier, friendlier atmosphere" compared with Atlanta's "L.A.-style, prissy gym-queen scene."

Still, the move west has not come without its sacrifices. Coleman's partner of five years, Lonnie, will remain in Atlanta for the time being to continue to run his successful catering business.

When asked how his sexuality has affected his work, Coleman becomes coy, admitting that perhaps his being gay has brought a certain *je ne sais quoi* to his work. Sounding just like Suzanne Sugarbaker on *Designing Women*, he drawls, "After all, honey, would you hire a straight man to cut your hair?"

And he dismisses the idea of homophobia within the theater. "It's not like that whole Hollywood thing—since the days of Dionysus and the Greeks, the theater has been the place for straddling boundaries."

He continues by quoting director Stephen Daltrey: "It used to be called the love that dare not speak its name—but in the theater it's the love that won't shut its fucking mouth."

Coleman expresses gratitude for the solidarity of our "tribe." "It saddens me when I hear a young gay man say, 'I hate gay men—they're so bitchy, they're so superficial.' To them I simply say, 'That hasn't been my experience.'"

A practitioner of Siddha Yoga for 10 years, Coleman has left the Baptist Church in his past, but his zeal for theater reflects the missionary spirit at his core. Musing on his new life in the Northwest, he can't help but use a word that reveals the boy who wanted to preach the gospel. "It's heaven," he sighs. **JN**

Chris Coleman's inaugural production with Portland Center Stage, *THE DEVILS*, opens Sept. 29 and runs through Oct. 22. The special GALA (Gay and Lesbian Audience) night is Oct. 3. For tickets call the box office at (503) 274-6588.

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