

THEATER

Ever the dreamers

Two Portland gay men bring a stunning play to life

BY ANDY SIMON

John Logan's script for *Never the Sinner* insists only that all the actors remain visible to the audience at all times. Other than that, it calls vaguely for an open and fluid staging. Logan leaves the rest of the envisioning to the director.

Jon Kretzu, director of Artists Repertory Theatre's production of *Never the Sinner*, worked long and hard at it. Once he had a vision of how he would bring the play to life, he turned to scenic designer Tim Stapleton to build that vision out of material stuff, out of wood and paint and found objects.

The process of envisioning took Kretzu more than two years, from the time he read the manuscript until the Portland production opened. During these years, he studied the 1924 Leopold and Loeb murder trial, read novels about it, watched films about it and listened to the music of the era. As he imagined how the play would look, he realized he faced some tough challenges.

"The script is very cinematic," he says. "It reads like a screenplay."

Kretzu realized he would have to develop the clarity of the image of every scene. Each scene would have to be pared down visually so the audience's attention would zoom in on the action like a close-up lens.

He came to think of the flow from one scene to another, with no curtain and no blackouts, as a kind of editing right on stage. The light, the sound and the set itself were so much a part of telling the story that he came to think of them as additional characters in the play.

Fortunately, Kretzu didn't have to do it all himself. Theater is always a collaborative undertaking, and he and Stapleton have a long and extremely successful history of working together: *Bent*, *As You Like It*, *Breaking the Code*, *Master Class*, *Lady Windemere's Fan*—the list of plays they've done, for Artists Repertory Theatre and for other companies, goes on and on.

They work so closely together their ideas intertwine. "For instance," Stapleton says, "it was Jon's idea to build a rough wooden plat-



The Joseph Cornell-inspired set for *Never the Sinner*; (insets) built-in boxes contain evidence

form for the main action, but I turned it so it pointed out into the audience. I also raised it and added the stairs at each corner, which it made it even more gallowslike."

Stapleton was fortunate to find used plank for the platform. Its heavy, rough-hewn look makes it seem solid but not smoothly finished. The roughness of the construction is used to great effect when, at one dramatic point in the play, the scene is lighted from beneath the platform, creating a powerful, hellish effect. Kretzu wisely uses the effect sparingly, which adds to its power.

Another example of close collaboration: Kretzu gave Stapleton a list of evidence items that would be mentioned in the trial. He wanted the objects to be visible as part of the set.

Stapleton recently had seen some artwork by Joseph Cornell consisting of assemblages displayed in small boxes. He realized that building a back wall for the set broken by Cornell-like boxes would be the perfect way to put the evidence in front of the audience. The back wall becomes a kind of installation and invites the audience to look more closely at the assemblages.

Kretzu and Stapleton plan to continue to work together. In fact, Artists Repertory Theatre will bring them together for the company's last play of the season, *Side Man* by Warren

Leight. Like their current project, this play is a period piece in which jazz is prominent.

Kretzu says he's really excited about the play. *Never the Sinner* is set in the beginning of the Jazz Age; *Side Man* is about the end of the era. As Kretzu describes it, the disintegration of a family parallels the coming apart of the jazz scene.

After *Side Man*? Neither director nor designer mentions future productions he has committed to, but Kretzu says he usually has about six plays in his head in various stages of planning.

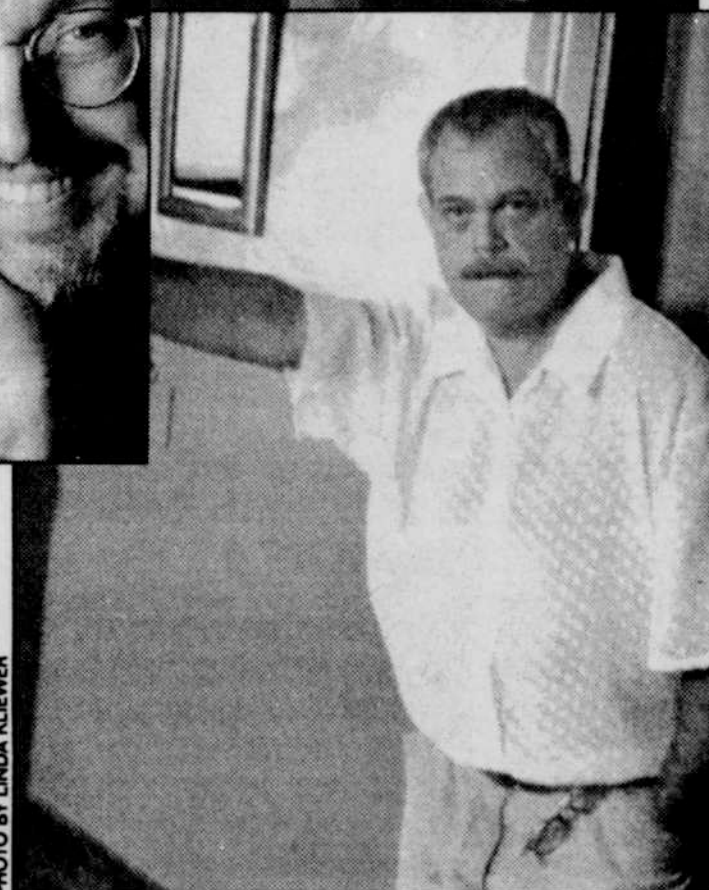
When asked if being a gay man influences his choice of material to direct, Kretzu says it doesn't in any direct way. "I find that any artist who does their work filters everything through their experience, so it's filtered through who I am," he says, then explains with a chuckle that he has a broader view of life "having slept with both persuasions."

That a play he's directing has gay characters doesn't get him more excited, he says. "I'm after the core of the piece and how it can affect an audience."



Jon Kretzu

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER



Tim Stapleton

ARTISTS REPERTORY THEATRE'S splendid—and very affecting—production of *Never the Sinner* continues Tuesdays to Sundays through Feb. 25. *Side Man* will open May 20 and run through July 1. For ticket information call 503-241-1278.

ANDY SIMON is a teacher and theater lover who lives in Southeast Portland.

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