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Kristine W Stronger

Kristine W. has been a staple in the worldwide dance scene since she released her first single, "Feel What You Want," which took international dance floors by storm. Her debut album, *LAND OF THE LIVING*, released in 1996, was an immediate classic, establishing her as a major force in the world of pop/dance music. It's been over three years since her fans have been able to get their hands on an official release from Kristine W. Her fans have been so hungry for her new music, remixes of certain songs from *STRONGER* have become some of the most bootlegged tracks in recent memory. "Loving You," "Clubland," and "Stand in Love," have already established themselves as dance floor staples. *STRONGER* has Kristine W. poised to break into the mainstream pop world, with powerful singles like "Stronger," and "If Only You Knew."

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THEATER**Singin' in the brain**Portland Center Stage's first musical ever
is smart, funny and very gay

BY MARC ACITO



Darrin Baker (left) and David Ayers (right) show their appreciation to T. Doyle Leverett, who plays the "nice nurse"

Anyone who played a nun or a Nazi in a high school production of *The Sound of Music* knows how difficult staging a musical can be. But what if the musical you're staging is set mostly in the mind of someone with a fatal brain condition? Suddenly, solving a problem like Maria seems about as easy as the boys on *Queer as Folk*.

Yet the folks at Portland Center Stage, queer and otherwise, are facing that exact challenge as they prepare the company's first musical ever.

A *New Brain* relates the tale of Gordon Schwinn, a composer who's been squandering his talents writing songs for a kiddie television show starring an obnoxious oversized frog named Mr. Bungee. Gordon collapses one day into a plate of ziti and awakens in the hospital to discover he's been diagnosed with a terminal brain condition. An operation is needed, but it's potentially dangerous; there's a significant chance he will die or never recover his faculties.

What haunts Gordon most are the songs he never will write if he doesn't live. From his bed, his wheelchair and the depths of an MRI, snatches of melody and memory flow out of his imagination and subconscious.

"I liken it to *The Wizard of Oz*," says Darrin Baker, who plays Gordon. "Metaphorically, Gordon gets knocked on the head and is sent on a journey. And what he learns there is huge."

A *New Brain* was written by William Finn, the gay composer most renowned for the musical *Falsettos*, a profoundly moving and wackily neurotic examination of bar mitzvahs, baseball, AIDS and the lesbian kosher caterers next door.

Even more so than his earlier work, *A New Brain* can be seen as a musical diary of Finn's own experiences. The composer for such kiddie fare as *The Poky Little Puppy* and *The Brave Little Toaster*, he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor in 1992, shortly after winning a pair of Tony Awards for *Falsettos*. After a narrow brush with death,

Finn lived to tell the tale and felt compelled to tell it the way he knew best: through music.

"When I came out of the hospital," he said shortly before the Lincoln Center premiere of *A New Brain* in 1998, "I couldn't sit at the piano without writing a decent song. At the piano, there was just all this gratitude that I was alive and all this life spewing out of me—the piano was singing—and I was just there to write it down."

Indeed, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* wrote that the musical's "transformational tour of the valley of death... finds Finn using smoother, more conventional harmonies and rhythms than he has before." And *USA Today* wrote, "Potent and original voices in today's musical theater are rare, and Finn remains one of them."

Equally potent and original is Portland Center Stage's new artistic director, Chris Coleman. He came to Portland last spring from his native Atlanta, where he was the founder of Actors Express, a dynamic and frequently controversial company that was a far cry from the kind of sedate programming Portland Center Stage has been known for.

Coleman already has demonstrated his commitment to shaking up the local theater scene by instituting a "second stage" for experimental work as well as announcing cooperative efforts with the cutting-edge Portland Institute for the Contemporary Arts. He was also one of six people recently chosen to take part in an international exchange program in Budapest, Hungary, designed to introduce artistic directors from the United States to theater ideas and techniques of Eastern Europe.

The challenge of manifesting Finn's kaleidoscopic journey was what drew Coleman to the work in the first place. "I was very intrigued by how Finn had pulled these very different songs together, connected with the most gossamer of threads," he says. "I knew that if the story was to make sense for the audience, the director and designers would have to do some pretty fancy footwork—and that felt like a fun job to have."

Indeed, Dex Edward's set for *A New Brain* features a huge MRI image on a turntable that from a distance almost resembles the earth as seen from the moon. It looms large as a metaphor for the brain as a world of imagination and, by extension, for the theater as a world of imagination. Meanwhile, musical transcriptions of an unfinished melody hover above the stage, flying in and out as Gordon struggles to piece the fragments together.

Coleman can relate to the musical's theme of



Chris Coleman rehearses his cast