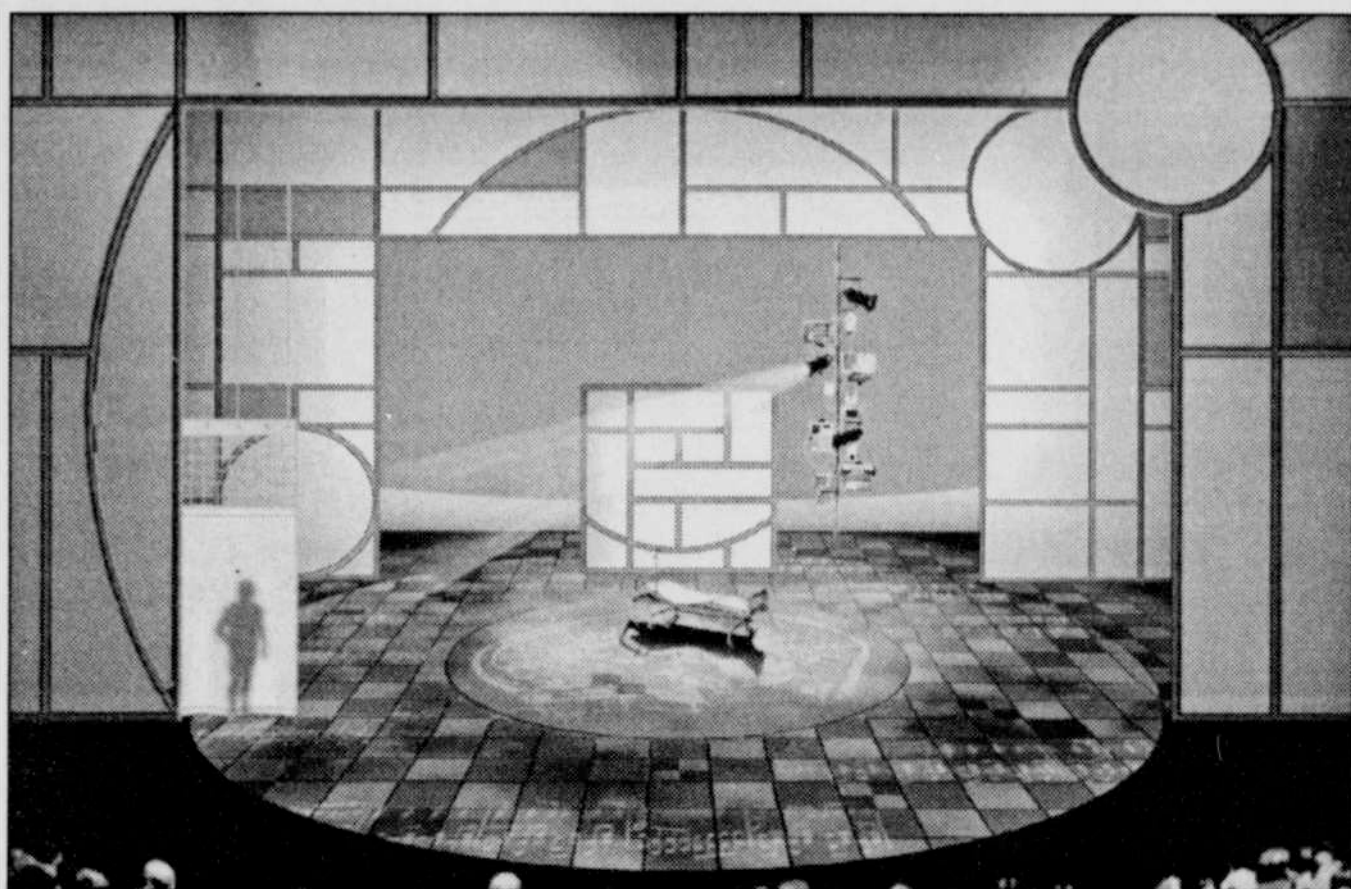




If Mondrian had designed a hospital room, it might look like this set

the redemptive power of art in a very personal way. The openly gay director lost his best friend, Stephen, a dancer, choreographer, actor and director, to AIDS-related lymphoma four years ago.

During a bedside vigil, Coleman was struck how, even in his final days, his friend was consumed with his art. "Here he was, lying in a hospital bed," he recalls, "hooked up to all manner of machines, half-dazed from the morphine and dementia...busily planning for his next productions, as he slowly let go his ties to this world."

The cast of *A New Brain* feels a connection to the material as well, concerned as it is with the artistic process. Two of Portland's brightest music theater talents, Susannah Mars and Kellie Johnson, are featured, as well as gay actor Paul Floding, the co-founder of Portland's highly esteemed Theatre Vertigo.

Gay actor T. Doyle Leverett, a Broadway veteran who plays Richard, "the nice nurse," recently took it upon himself to help straight actors Baker and David Ayers (who plays Roger, Gordon's lover) research their roles by taking them to Silverado. Leverett, for one, found Portland's friendly atmosphere a refreshing change from New York. "I was the queen of the prom that night," he said.

Leverett was last in Portland with the national tour of *Fiddler on the Roof*, one of 23 productions of the show he's done. "I've played everything from Tevye to Third Jew from the Left," he says. "I wanted to play Fourth Jew from the Left, but they cast somebody younger. It's a lousy business."

Despite Leverett's assistance, Baker hasn't needed much help preparing for the role of Gordon. A frequent fixture on Broadway in shows such as *Footloose*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Sunset Blvd.* and *Les Misérables*, he made it as far as the final callbacks to replace the lead in the original New York production of *A New Brain* but wasn't cast; the opportunity to play the role is a particularly sweet triumph for him.

Moreover, Baker just completed his very first gay love scene as Ted's "appropriate" boyfriend in a recent episode of Showtime's *Queer as Folk*. He admits that tongue-kissing a naked man "wasn't bad, actually" but found it hard on his ego to spend an entire day completely naked performing a scene in which the other character screams at him: "You might try going to a gym. Y'know, get on a treadmill for once in your life, wouldja?"

It was Baker who recommended Leverett for the role when the original actor cast was injured in a train wreck less than a week before rehearsals

began. Knowing the role required someone "big, gay and warm," Baker immediately thought of his friend Leverett.

Not one to hide his light under a bushel, this big, gay, warm man has been out and proud for his entire professional career. "If they want to hire me," he says, "they're going to have to hire all aspects of me."

Those aspects include his unapologetic Christian faith; Leverett uses the itinerant actor's life as an opportunity to provide faith counseling to gay men damaged by Christian churches. "I love being a gay Christian," he says. "It pisses off all the right people."

Leverett's ebullient spirit embodies the life-affirming theme of *A New Brain*. Andre Bishop, artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, wrote upon the occasion of the recording of the original cast album, "What is most striking about [*A New Brain*] is the author's great heart...[Finn's] love of life always collides...with his unabashed love of musical theater."

"This show is going to make the gay community so proud," says Leverett, beaming. "It's about choosing life—it's all about saying 'yes' to life."

Art's healing power is a theme as old as the tale of Orpheus and one that has been well-told in other musicals like *A Chorus Line* and *Sunday in the Park with George* or films like *All That Jazz* and *Topsy-Turvy*, but the desire to leave a legacy behind when faced with one's own mortality is a universal impulse we all can understand.

A New Brain adds its own zany twist to the genre, and for that reason alone it is a must-see for all music theater queens; but for those of you who simply can't abide brainless musicals, this should be just what the doctor ordered. **J**

A NEW BRAIN runs March 30 through April 22 at Newmark Theatre, 1111 SW Broadway. Gay and Lesbian Audience night is April 3. Call 503-274-6588 for tickets.



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