

THEATER

Using the real "f" word

You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll meet girls!

BY LYNN THOMAS

Whoever said feminist humor is an oxymoron obviously never saw Melinda Pittman's 2001 musical comedy odyssey, *Wonderbreads*.

Winner of the Oregon Book Award for Best Drama, this production brings to life the "sheroes" of the 20th century. Through the magic of suspended disbelief, it places them all in the same place at the same time so they can share ideas, songs and the occasional soft-shoe.

The story goes something like this: While seeking solace in a difficult-to-open bottle of Odwalla juice, some of the women of Lilith Fair bemoan the turn their careers have taken since that festival ended. When the bottle finally gives up the ghost, it does so literally, and out pops Lilith—you know, Adam's first gal pal, the one before Eve, later dissed as a hag, witch, lesbian, etc. She then introduces the other fair women to the likes of Susan B. Anthony (who, incidentally, calls a rollicking square dance), Mother Jones, Carrie Nation, Margaret Sanger, Gloria Steinem and special guest goddess Xena.

Famous lesbians abound as Babe Didrikson Zaharias outs herself in a hilarious version of Sonny and Cher's "I'm the True Babe." Leader of the pack Pittman emerges as Marie Equi, radical lesbian physician of Portland herstorical notoriety, who often was harassed and jailed for administering health care to union women and men in the early part of the past century.

When supershero Hillary Rodham Clinton conjures up Eleanor Roosevelt from her Ouija board, they commiserate on the difficulties surrounding being strong, independent, politically vocal first women. Later, when Eleanor gets broadsided by pointed questions regarding her



Melinda Pittman (center) wears most of the hats in *Wonderbreads*

female secretary/companion/lover, she utters the immortal words, "Don't ask don't tell," which leads to a fabulous interruption by Margaretthe Cammermeyer singing the old Fred Astaire standard, "Won't Tell, Don't Ask Me," complete with tap-dancing military types.

The show also has serious moments: a song that tells the plight of migrant farmworkers and one that portrays the story of Julia Butterfly and her fight to save a giant redwood by living in it. Marian Anderson singing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is also quite moving.

Pittman's original song "America" shows all the hope and despair of the immigrant experience. *Wonderbreads* also includes a tribute to Elizabeth

Cady Stanton, and when Fannie Lou Hamer tells off President Bush, we are all right behind her.

Producer/director/writer/performer Pittman has worked in professional theaters from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. She has directed pieces as diverse as *You Can't Take It with You*, *Passion* and *The Breasts of Tiresias*.

In 1984, Pittman wrote her first full-length play with music, *Atlantis*. She joined the Angels (now Angels DotComedy) in 1985 and began writing, directing and performing topical satiric comedy revues and musicals, including *Paradise Flossed* and *It's a Jungle Out There*.

Portland actor and original *Wonderbroad*

Sharon Mann returns for this, the second incarnation of *Wonderbreads*.

Joining them are some of the area's finest talents, including Portland musical comedy star Rebecca Kimball, rising singer-songwriter sensation Jude Hill, emerging artist Audra Gandy, choreographer and singer Yolanda Lopez, Portland Comedy Sportz founder Amy Gray and Australian diva Selma Chook. Also, from the original production, featured pianist Tom Ten Eyck returns along with guitarist Greg Scholl.

"*Wonderbreads* is a show about where we've come from and where we're headed," Pittman says. "We sing and dance and tell jokes, all the while honoring our foremothers and all the foreplay they wished they had before we got here."

She adds: "This is our story, all of our stories. These may be famous women we are portraying, but *Wonderbreads* is really about the lives of ordinary women and how we all change the world."

The show is a fast-paced, furiously funny musical comedy. It's also a fabulously entertaining and educational look at women who made a difference.

Very few musicals are by, for and about women. And even fewer use the "f" word (feminist) so unapologetically while managing to maintain that precarious balance of dignity and levity. **[C]**

WONDERBREADS plays 8 p.m. through April 14 the Hollywood Theatre, 4036 N.E. Sandy Blvd. Tickets are \$20 at the door or \$18 in advance through the Angel Box Office at 503-288-5181 or Fastixx at 503-228-8499.

LYNN THOMAS is a Portland free-lance writer and musician.

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