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Scandals Lounge—1038 SW Stark St.	1
Shanghai Steakery—16 NW Broadway	9
Silverado—1217 SW Stark St.	11
Starky's—2913 SE Stark St.	4
300 Club—300 Liberty St. SE	Salem
3 Friends Coffeehouse—201 SE 12th Ave.	2
Three Sisters Tavern—1125 SW Stark St.	11
Touchstone Coffee House—7631 NE Gilson St.	15

WESTSIDE PORTLAND

THEATER

Birds of a feather

Poison Waters steals the spotlight in *La Cage Aux Folles*

BY ANDY MANGELS



Poison Waters (far right) flocks together with the cast of *La Cage*

With probably one of the best-known gay plots in modern entertainment, *La Cage Aux Folles* is more familiar to modern (read: younger) audiences as *The Birdcage*. The 1996 film cast Robin Williams as the slightly more butch "husband," while a not-yet-out Nathan Lane was the effeminate drag queen "wife."

Older audiences will recall the 1978 film *La Cage Aux Folles* (and its two less-successful sequels), an adaptation of a French play by Jean Poiret. But it is the 1983 musical version, written by Harvey Fierstein with music by the incomparable Jerry Herman, that lit up Broadway for years. And now the musical has come to Portland for a dazzling staging by the Musical Theatre Company.

La Cage Aux Folles is actually the name of a popular drag nightclub whose showgirls are a bitchy but talented lot. Its owner/announcer is George (Rick Lewis), and its star is Zaza, actually his flamboyant husband, Albert (Richard Hurst), who is aided by butler/maid Jacob/Claudia (Kevin Cook, aka Poison Waters).

When George's son, Michael (Tom Stewart), comes to visit, he tells his father he's getting married—but his fiancée is the daughter of ultraconservative Sen. Dindon (Michael Jones).

Hurst starts out stumbling—his opening scenes show almost zero charisma, and Zaza's hair isn't nearly good enough for a drag star—but by midway through Act 1, he captures our hearts. His version of "I Am What I Am" is heartrending, and his impersonation of John Wayne is giddy fun.

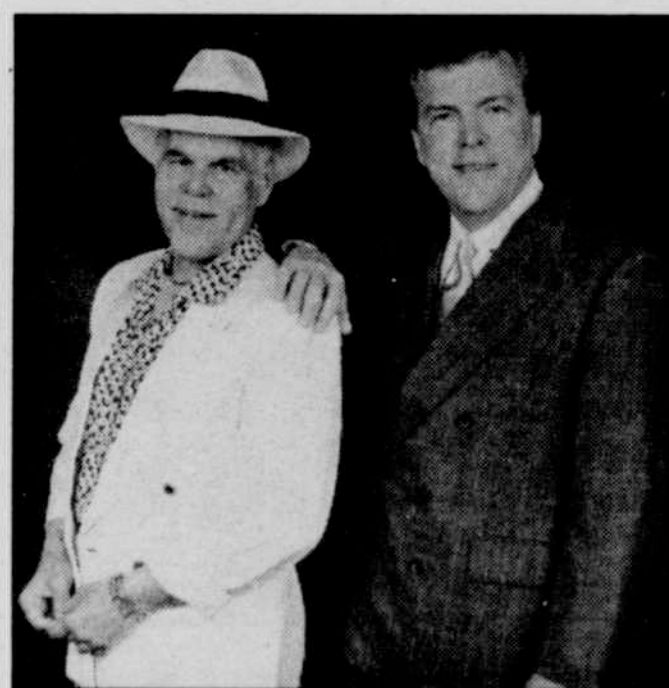
Poison's Jacob is a hoot and by far the campiest thing on stage. Although his costumes and dialogue generally lend funny power, Cook makes even some of the less humorous lines a stitch. Next to the other funnier and meatier roles, Stewart's Michael is just OK; the young actor has a Bing Crosby appeal but little of his charisma.

Beyond the acting and songs, audiences will be most dazzled by the costumes and choreography. It appears no expense was spared (nor ostrich unplucked) for the several dozen impressive looks that arrive on stage on the eight dancer/singers, and some of the quick changes are impressively fast. Kudos to Carlos M. Quezada as the Latina Salsa Caliente, who manages to steal the limelight every time he's on stage.

This endorsement doesn't mean *La Cage* is without some flaws. Dindon and his wife (Emily Sahler) have unbelievable Southern accents, and daughter Anne (Sarah Lamb) has virtually nothing to do. (All three roles are very underwritten.)

The song "Cocktail Counterpoint," sung by most of the major players at the dinner party, is nearly incomprehensible. Worst of all is the final number, in which the orchestra completely drowns out the cast. And why exactly are two (possibly three) of the drag queens played by real women?

Still, despite these minor stumbling blocks, *La Cage Aux Folles* is an entertaining and rewarding night at the theater. Although the story is familiar, it doesn't seem dated at all, and its sentiments about family—and indelible message that gay relationships are based on love—are a wonderful way to lead into Gay Pride month. **JR**



Albert and George—before the makeover

George is happy about Michael's news but is disappointed when his son asks him to get rid of Albert for a dinner with the in-laws-to-be so they think he comes from a "normal" family.

Albert is crushed—he raised Michael like his own son—but agrees to the request. However, when Michael's natural mother fails to show, Albert takes matters into his own hands—and make-up kit.

In a show that relies on its leads to dazzle the hearts and minds, this *La Cage* comes up almost a winner. Lewis is stellar, looking and sounding like a smooth Robert Preston (*Music Man*, *Victor/Victoria*) and seeming born for the stage.

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES plays through June 3 at the Eastside Performance Center, 531 S.E. 14th Ave. For tickets call the box office at 503-916-6592 or Fastixx.

ANDY MANGELS does tough drag each year at Valentines from Hell but otherwise leaves the dresses to those with shapelier legs and less facial hair. You can write him at AMangelsSW@aol.com.