

THEATER

Very gay and very good

New play asks if a misunderstood gay son can find real happiness

BY RICHARD BRAY

On Nov. 2 the epicenter of gay theater will be right here in River City. Three creative geniuses have collaborated to present the world premiere of *Flesh and Blood* at Portland Center Stage. Chris Coleman directs Peter Gaitens' adaptation of Michael Cunningham's 1995 novel.

In fact, this is the first stage adaptation of a book by the author, who has been familiar to readers of quality gay fiction since his celebrated debut, *A Home at the End of the World*. In 1999 he received the Pulitzer Prize for his most recent novel, *The Hours*, soon to be a film starring Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman and Julianne Moore.

The adaptation by Gaitens, who worked closely with Cunningham, originally was presented as a workshop reading at Portland Center Stage's JAW/West 2000. The playwright is an accomplished actor and will fulfill both roles in this production. He is also a usual suspect at New York's Theatre Workshop, where *Flesh and Blood* again will be directed by Coleman later this year.

The multigenerational play, which spans the tumultuous '60s through the gay '90s, has something for everyone. The family of Constantine Stassos rides the waves of 40 years of American social change. Questions of infidelity, drug use, homosexuality, interracial relationships and suicide make for a rich tapestry of tension.

Stassos is a Greek immigrant, a gardener with no green thumb for raising a family. Conflict swirls around his family of five and their significant others.

Gaitens portrays misunderstood gay son Billy. In watching him rehearse, his complete familiarity and ease with the material is obvious; his portrayal is a natural.

Although the play also observes his siblings, most of it focuses on Billy's first gay encounter, his coming out and his discovery of real love with Harry, played by out Portland actor Kevin Corstange.

Advertisements for *Flesh and Blood* frankly warn of nudity and explicit sexual content. For seasoned theatergoers, these scenes (both gay and straight) won't be too shocking, but for Portland Center Stage some new ground does get broken here. So how does artistic director Coleman expect this will be received?

"For our conservative straight audience, it will probably be more graphic in nature than they wish it was," he admits. "For our gay audience, I think it's going to seem pretty tame. There's actually not full nudity anywhere in it. Certainly there are some sexy scenes...but not a lot of skin."

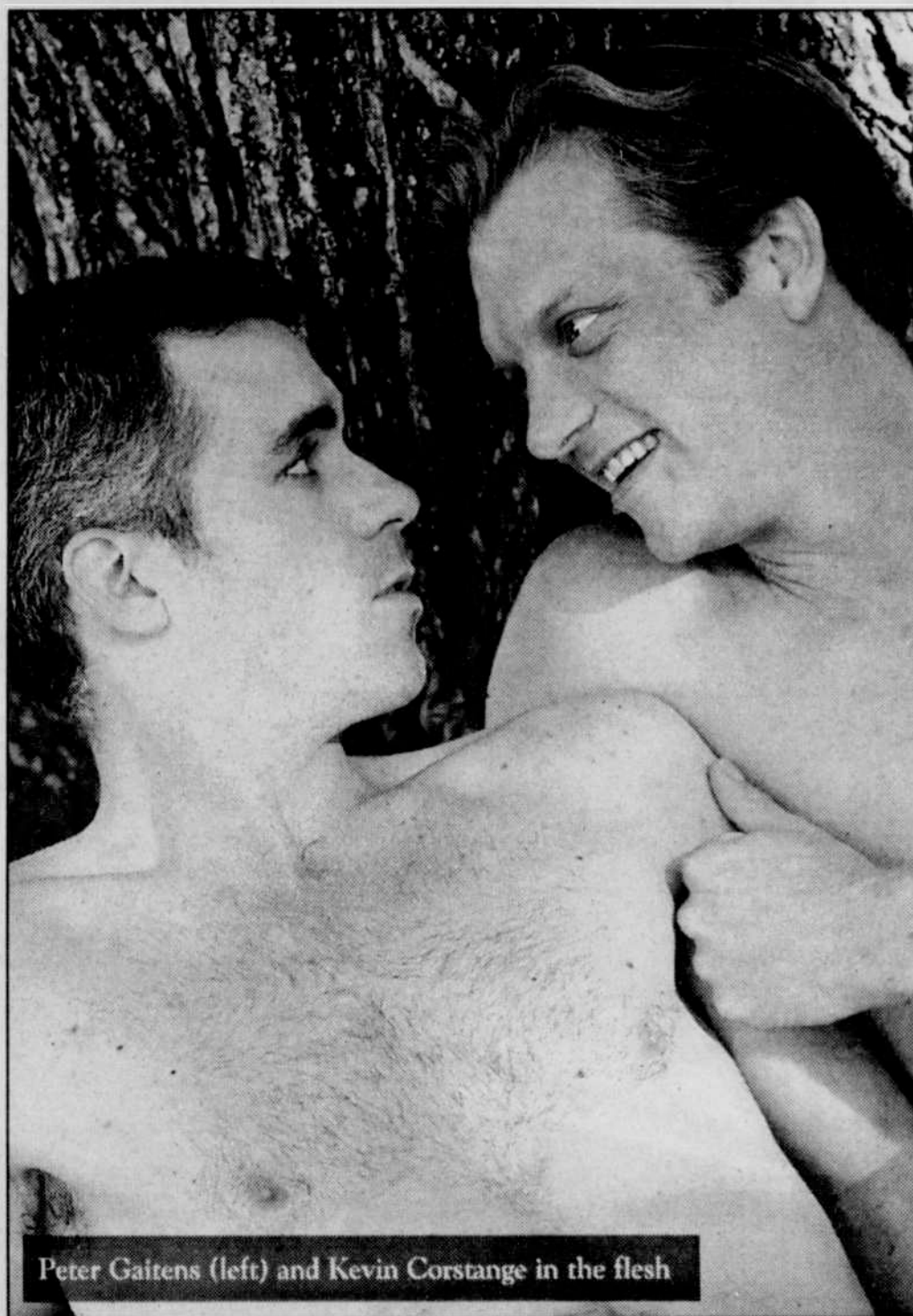
Coleman addresses the pervasive nudity in gay theater: "We're fascinated for whatever reason, because we repressed it for so long. We're fascinated by images of our sexuality. It's the same reason

Out magazine has some buff guy with his shirt off on the cover. It's because gay men are so visually oriented. It's what brings them into the theater."

Flesh and Blood isn't strictly gay by any stretch. Lesbian theatergoers will find much to like and savor in this well-written and beautifully acted play full of universal themes.

Billy's sisters, Zoë (Holly Spencer) and Susan (Tara Falk), are equally complex and interesting. His mother, Mary (Caren Browning), is also a multilayered character—both victim and peacekeeper.

At just a little more than three hours, *Flesh and Blood* is a long play. Still, Coleman thinks he will have no problem holding audience attention.



Peter Gaitens (left) and Kevin Corstange in the flesh

"It's the length it has to be to tell this scope of story," he says. "It has the rhythm of a novel. It's less compact, but the payoff is pretty amazing as a result of all three relationships you get pulled into."

Although it might sound like heavy drama—and much of it is—*Flesh and Blood* has a funny bone as well. Much of it is provided by drag queen Cassandra, played by Jack Clay, who peppers his doses of wisdom with humor. "It's all right there together," Coleman adds.

Most of the play takes place in the Stassos garden. The innovative, abstract set, designed by Andrew Lieberman, is deep and rich, like the family, and helps guide the audience through 40 years of their life. It features three wide tiers, allowing action to take place on different tiers simultaneously.

Coleman's enthusiasm for this production is palpable. He believes in these people—these

authors, these actors, this creation.

"Having the privilege of watching this company of actors breathe life into the play for the first time on the planet, here in Portland, is a singular joy," Coleman says with pride. Unlike a reinterpretation of a play that's been seen in many versions, *Flesh and Blood* is being born in Portland, and all those involved are able to bring their original visions to the work.

In the world of theater, it can be tough for new plays to compete with established, familiar repertoire. Mounting *Flesh and Blood* is a rare, complex and ultimately gratifying effort for Portland Center Stage.

Coleman and crew obviously have worked hard to make this premiere a huge success. For fans of theater who value innovation and originality, *Flesh and Blood* is a must-see.

With renowned gay playwright Edward Albee in Portland for opening night, author Cunningham in town for previews and the playwright acting in the play, a lot of pressure is on Coleman to deliver a first-class production. But he knows where his control ends. For

him, remaining centered among the whirlwind of attention the play is garnering is key.

"I'm trying to stay simple about it...just do the play and stay focused on this production, what needs to happen, not get too wigged out and make this thing as good as we can make it," he explains. "You can't direct the hoopla." □

FLESH AND BLOOD opens 8 p.m. Nov. 2 at Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway. Immediately after the premiere, join cast, crew and Edward Albee for cocktails and dancing to Ennis and Theory in the rotunda. Gay and Lesbian Audience night is 7 p.m. Nov. 6. A party sponsored by Just Out featuring hostess Poison Waters will follow the performance at Dragonfish, 909 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets to the play, which runs through Nov. 18, are \$12-\$44 from 503-274-6588.

RICHARD BRAY is a Portland free-lance writer who cherishes his season tickets to Portland Center Stage.



Stassos family portrait

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