

Unapologetically adult

Welcome to the world of a gay Stephen King on acid

by Sarah Leimert

This month Portland will be treated to the world premiere of a play only one company in town is bold enough to produce.

Stark Raving Theatre describes *After the Zipper*, winner of the Rosenfield Playwriting Award and the Live Oak Script Award, as "an odyssey of an American threesome attempting to quench their desires and find happiness in an alternative relationship." Like the 2001 film *Memento*, this controversial piece is not told in linear time, and events unfold with a dizzying collage effect.

Matthew Zrebski first wrote *Zipper* in 1993. Now it finally has found a home and is charged up and ready to hit the stage.

In addition to being a writer, director, composer and actor, Zrebski is also the associate artistic director of Stark Raving Theatre. Until he submitted his script to the company for consideration, no playhouse was willing to produce it. Zrebski speculates the risk was too great—financially and otherwise—for most organizations to take on.

But artistic director Jim Wilhite felt that the story needed to be told and that if Stark Raving didn't produce it, no one would. Zrebski has worked closely with director Robert Tollefson on multiple rewrites to make the piece strong and relevant.

The story is based on two men and a woman who attempt a three-way relationship. The actors play multiple characters throughout the performance as they unfold their tale of the human struggle to find—and keep—love.

After the Zipper contains many moments of humor. Actor Michael Teufel jokes that the play is a love story with the theme "I'm not gay, but my boyfriend is."

Humor helps balance the energy of the script, but Zrebski calls it "a psychological thriller [that] deals with control, need, sexual

Jimmy, Dan and Lucy are a triangle pretending to work



identity and religion." He describes the fast-paced work as "a very heavy show."

The title often is misinterpreted as a reference to sex. Although the show does contain extremely explicit themes and content, the author's intention is to refer to the carnival ride known as the Zipper.

"It occurred to me that there was a double-entendre," Tollefson says, "but it has never once meant that to me. The experience for the audience should be completely visceral. It should be a ride."

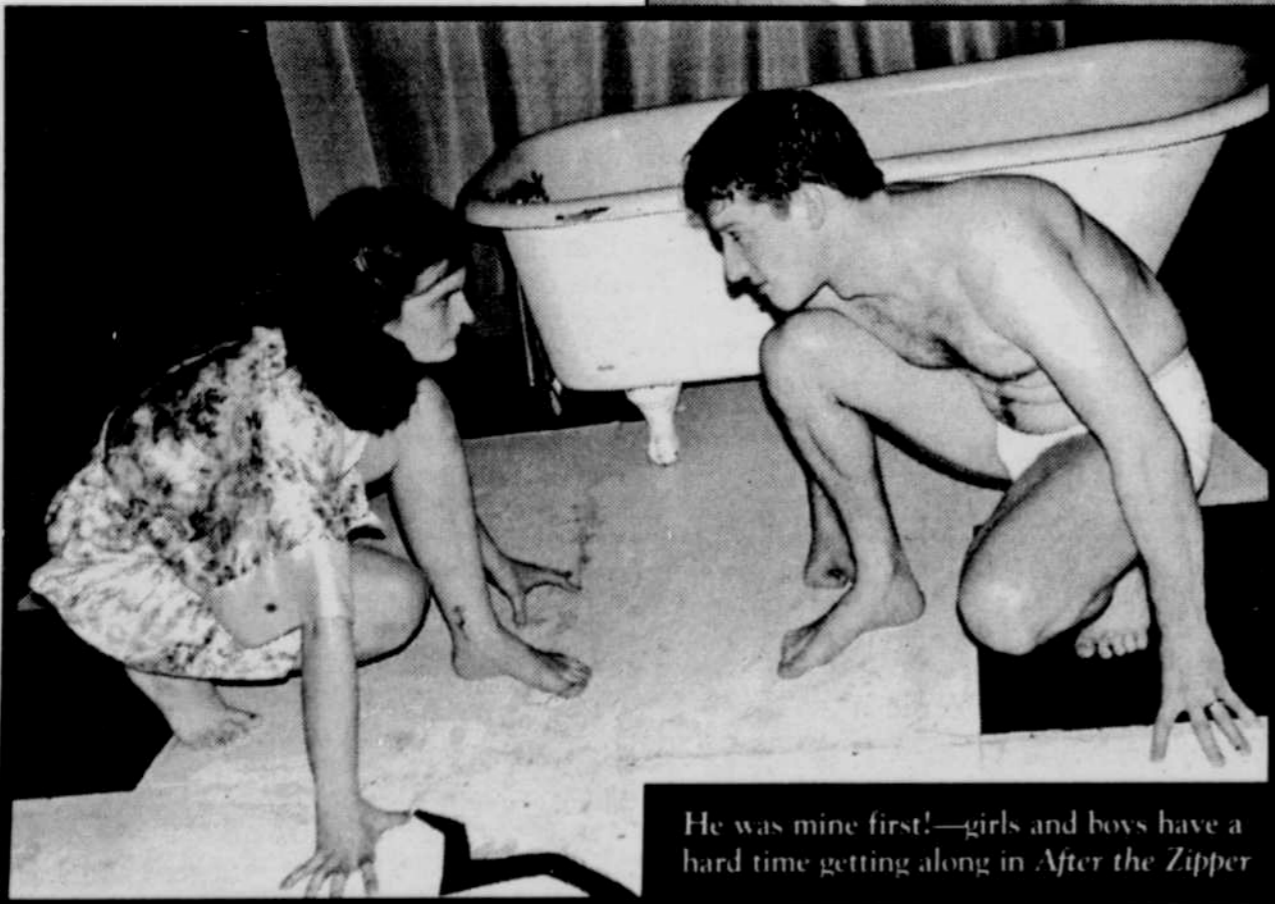
Zrebski makes it clear *After the Zipper* was not written with any kind of political motivation. He says his best work comes from writing stories without any agendas attached.

"For me," he explains, "this particular play—more than being about sexuality, coming out or the juxtaposition of those things—is about the result of basing your actions on fear." The characters go in search of what they believe will be a utopianlike existence with each other, but the result, Zrebski says, is "quite horrifying."

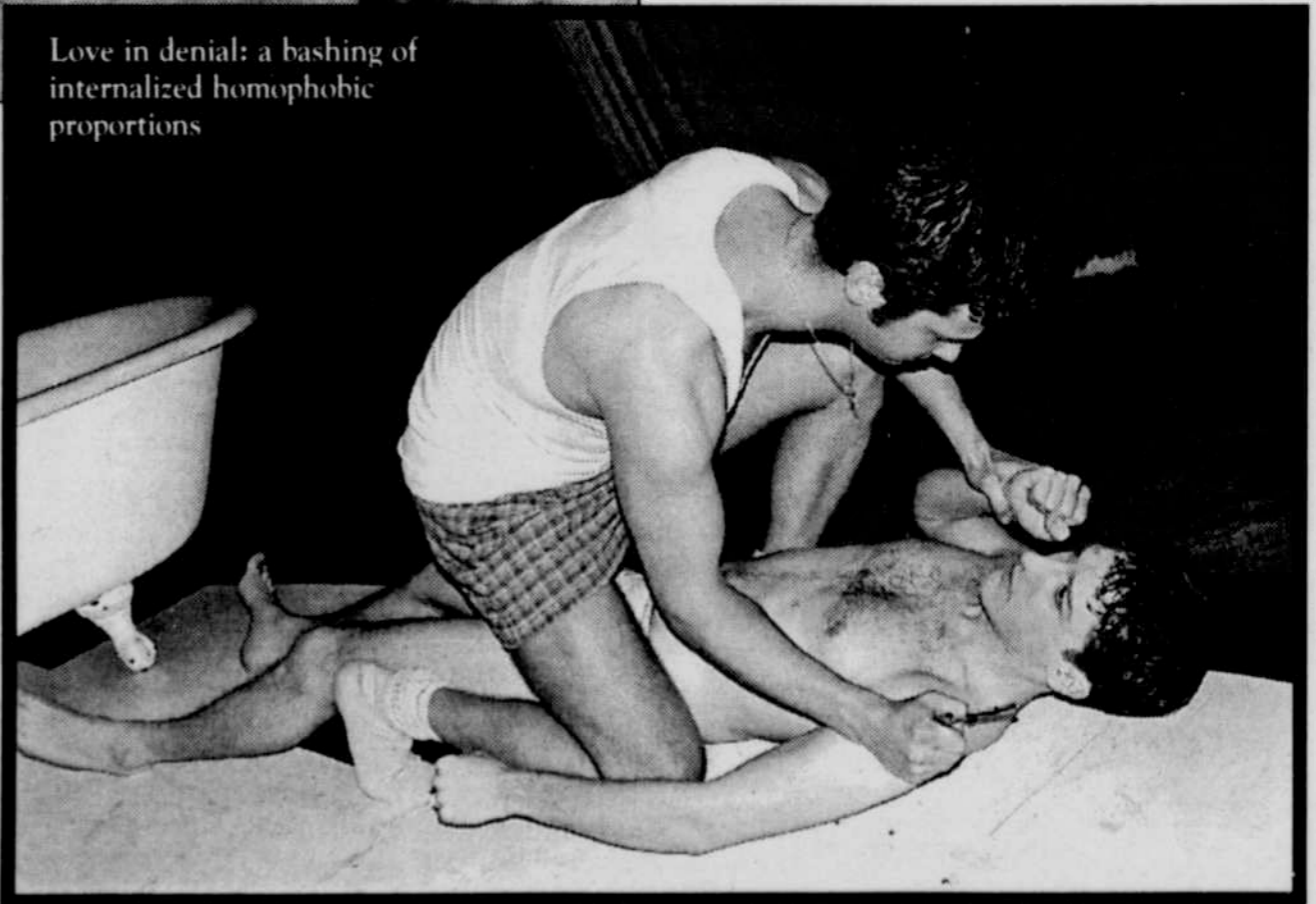
Stark Raving Theatre, although progressive, is not necessarily known for producing queer-themed plays. However, the writer and director are both gay, and one of Zrebski's goals is to draw sexual minority audience members. "It does speak to this particular group of people, and I am very curious to see what they have to say about it," he says.

Still, Zrebski is hesitant to refer to it as a gay play and emphasizes the simple, universal theme at its core: the human quest to find love. "There is so much desperation to find love and acceptance and security that these people are willing and able to do anything, literally, to find that," Tollefson says. "They are so spiritually barren that they will do whatever it takes to have this feeling."

The most important goal, Tollefson says,



He was mine first!—girls and boys have a hard time getting along in *After the Zipper*



Love in denial: a bashing of internalized homophobic proportions