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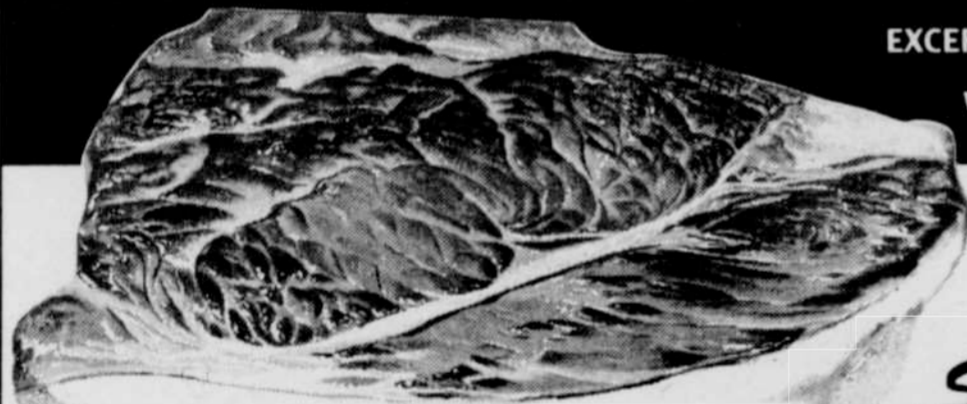
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THEATER

Love! Death! Betrayal!

The Brody Theater dishes out life off the cuff

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

It was a bit of serendipitous misfortune that first brought Brad Fortier, a charter member of The Brody Theater, to Portland back in 1995. After plans to tour the States and Mexico with a friend fell through, the Milwaukee native agreed to help another friend with her move to Portland.

After checking out the scene, he decided to call the Rose City home, too. "I wanted/needed to get out of the Midwest," he recalls. "I was tired of the...fairly closeted queer culture in Milwaukee, and I was just stagnating creatively." Admitting he was "immediately charmed by the Northwest and Portland specifically," Fortier "went about setting up a new life."

Eventually he signed up for improvisation classes from Brody and performed in the then-fledgling group's first production, *The Damn Dirty Apes*. The grueling initial work of establishing a theater company has paid off. "Early on, we would perform for two to four people," Fortier remembers, "but as we improved, word of mouth spread, and we were packing houses."

Brody performances are conceived as "long-form" improvisation; in this respect the group was, according to Fortier, the first of its kind in Oregon. The form "uses a few suggestions to create a longer piece of theater through the exploration of patterns, connections, themes and character relationships," he explains.

"Short-form improvisation is the more common—short games that set up a laugh but don't really go beyond that," Fortier continues, citing the show *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* as an example. "We try and follow the teachings of Del Close, who was essentially the founding father of long-form improvisation.... Del considered a laugh garnered by wit to be a 'cheap laugh' and a laugh gotten by recognition of a truth to be the best."

Fortier cites Comedy Central's now-defunct *Upright Citizen's Brigade* and Chicago's revered Second City troupe as personal inspiration, along with Portland improviser John Breen.

Background also has something to do with it. "Most of the Wisconsinites I know have dark senses of humor," he notes. "Long, cold winters will do that to you. We have a saying in Milwaukee: 'You can't drink the water, but you can eat the people.' It's a grim reference to the cryptosporidian outbreaks and Jeffrey Dahmer hysteria in the early '90s."

So, clearly, audiences can expect some irreverence from a Brody performance. "We don't go out of our way to...depict bigots, racists and misogynists, but we never write off the possibility of those types of characters emerging," Fortier says. "Exploring those realities can be dangerous and rewarding. The important thing is to play it real and expose it for what it is—ignorance and misunderstanding. Audiences love to see performers put themselves in dangerous situations and get out of them."

The Brody's last show, *The Living Newspaper*, which used headlines of the day as its springboard, was depicting the Columbia space shuttle disaster and satirizing its incessant media coverage by the end of the day it occurred.



Let Dr. Brad Fortier take your temperature at *Generic Hospital*

Fortier is fairly unique in being at ease with his sexual orientation in a world where, in contrast to traditional theater and acting, not many openly gay voices are heard. He is the only gay member of Brody.

"There are very few gay improvisers who make it to this level of commitment, dedication and notoriety," he says. "In Amy Seham's *Whose Improv Is It, Anyway?* the claim is made that improv is for straight, white, upper-middle-class guys, and they decide who makes it up the ladder."

Fortier doesn't necessarily subscribe to that theory. "I think drive and talent is all it takes to ascend the ladder—that's been my experience at the Brody and other improv theaters. I also think my being gay makes me a more empathetic teacher because I understand the notions of being caught off guard or looking bad from my closeted days. Those are some of the biggest hurdles to conquer when starting out in improvisation."

The Brody's upcoming show is Fortier's own brainchild: the latest installment of *Generic Hospital*, which enjoyed a previous run a couple of years ago. But, because it's improv, no two shows are ever alike.

This one is, Fortier says, a serialized, satirical "union of the bastard child of *ER* and the melodramatic spirit of daytime soap operas. The medicine cabinet in *Generic Hospital* is filled with love, betrayal, hope, loss, joy, sorrow and just plain fun."

In the end, though, Fortier hopes that the Brody's (and his) sense of humor goes beyond what we're used to. "If you're looking for portrayals of famous or infamous people, you won't see that on our stage necessarily," he says. "If you're looking for portrayals of people who are dealing with fame, death, love, anger, fear, betrayal and redemption, that's what you're going to see." □

THE BRODY THEATER, 1904 N.W. 27th Ave., presents *Generic Hospital* at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday from March 14 to April 12. Tickets are \$10 from 503-224-0688 or www.brodytheater.com. Visit the Internet site to learn about Brody's improv classes and workshops.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Seattle free-lance writer.

PHOTO BY TOM JOHNSON