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THEATER

From the pulpit to the stage

Dave Jenkins leaves the ministry to come home queer

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Living as we do in a world that (still) generally assumes exclusive heterosexuality, the coming-out process is one experience that, even while running the gamut from no big deal to major trauma, may be the one reliably consistent, unqualified difference between the sexual minorities community and straights.

Regardless of whether queerness is inherent biological, the majority of queer people, identity-wise, arrive at our sexuality. And most of us, once we admit to ourselves that we are sexually attracted to our own gender (or have otherwise "different" sexual leanings), are forced to reassess, disrupt or radically alter some of the most important things in our lives: our families and other relationships, our religion, where we came from, where we're going.

A new one-man show, *Coming Home Queer*, tackles all of these issues through the autobiographical revelations of Dave Jenkins, a North Portland resident who didn't begin coming out until five years ago at age 45.

As a minister, Jenkins felt he had some important changes to make. "The bottom line was that I wanted to lead a fully out, authentic life and would not be allowed to do that in the context of ministry," he says. "In December of 2000 I stood before my congregation at University Park United Methodist Church and said, 'I am a self-avowed practicing homosexual.' Those were considered the words that would remove me from the ministry."

Having told the district superintendent he would resign rather than be fired, Jenkins says the choice for him "was not between my faith and my sexuality. The choice for me was if I was going to continue to be a minister under a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

He took an administrative job with the church—a job he likes, though he no longer attends services there—while continuing his post-coming-out "sexual adolescence." He says he "still felt the need for a 'pulpit,'" though, and began publishing an e-mail column called "Gay Dave's Homily and Haircut," which has more than 100 recipients.

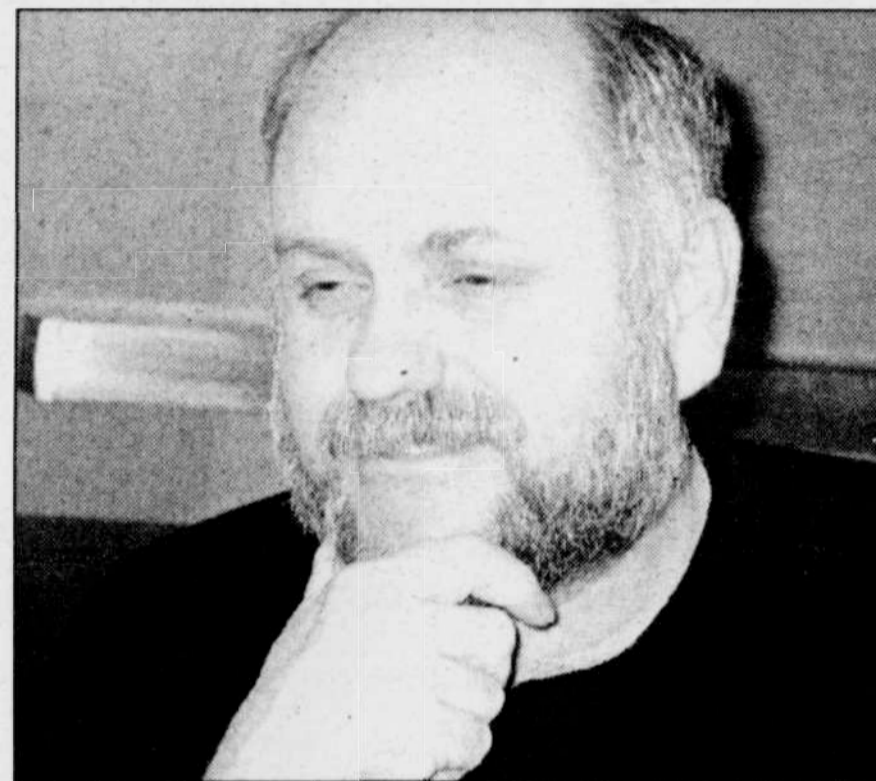
Writing was, for Jenkins, a natural extension of an already-developed storytelling persona. "Someone once said of my preaching, 'You preach like a standup comic!' I considered it a compliment."

That penchant for performance, coupled with an admiration for Garrison Keillor and David Sedaris, a history of dabbling in theater and his own upcoming half-centennial birthday ("Rather than ignoring it or hiding under the blankets, I decided to do something unique"), inspired the idea for his one-man show, which he would debut in his hometown of La Grande.

Coming Home Queer—consisting of prepared monologues, e-mail excerpts and extemporaneous storytelling—was performed at Eastern Oregon University's Ackerman Hall on March 1 before an audience of, Jenkins estimates, about 40 people, including "a man who

dropped out of high school in La Grande and was taken to the state mental hospital to 'cure' him of his problem; a mother that brought her high school son—I assume because he's gay or questioning; a lesbian couple from the town; 10 students who were taking a course called Human Sexuality 101; two of my high school classmates; a man who was in my father's Sunday school class as a child; some family and friends; and an assortment of other people."

The homecoming was remarkably free of controversy, even after a cover story in La Grande's newspaper, *The Observer*. "I was surprised that [the article] didn't engender any letters to the editor," Jenkins says. "Originally,



Dave Jenkins performs *Coming Home Queer* one night only April 5 at CoHo Theatre

the college felt that I should pay for security...I wasn't afraid of protesters or hecklers. As it turned out, rightly so."

He feels the town has grown in tolerance along with the rest of the world. "A community like La Grande is no longer as isolated as it once was," he asserts. "People have the Internet, cell phones, e-mail and cable TV. I probably couldn't take a date to a bar in Elgin and dance with him...but overall, it is probably not a problem to be an out gay person in La Grande."

Jenkins, who is bringing a somewhat retooled version of *Coming Home Queer* to Portland's CoHo Theatre on April 5, has combed through the back-catalog of his life, from childhood through to the present day. He's included a reminiscence of another man who reached out to him emotionally; the suicide of a possibly gay, married next-door neighbor from his childhood; and an e-mail correspondence with an Internet chat room friend that has the emotionally engaging properties of a novel.

"*Coming Home Queer* is a very personal show," Jenkins shares. "When I did the show in La Grande, I warned the audience that I may cry at some point [and that] these tears would not be 'theatrical' tears. Helping people on the journey towards authenticity requires someone to tell their story honestly, even if it is with tears in their eyes." J

DAVE JENKINS performs *Coming Home Queer* 3 p.m. April 5 at CoHo Theater, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. Tickets are \$10 from 503-246-7139.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Seattle free-lance writer.

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS