

Portland's attempts to make a name for itself in the arts are finding increasing success in the field of theater.

Major New York companies regularly make stops with glitzy, grand-scale shows like *The Producers*, but more interesting to those who prefer a vibrant local scene are the plays coming out of venues like Portland Center Stage, Artists Repertory Theatre, Theatre Vertigo, triangle productions! and Stark Raving Theatre.

The visibility campaign gets a serious boost this month with Stark Raving's production of *Tundra*—the ideal project for this purpose.

Written and directed by two locals—Joseph Fisher and Matthew Zrebski, respectively—the play is already making waves as far as New York and Washington, D.C., where the Kennedy Center awarded it a production grant—the foremost honor for a new U.S. play, putting *Tundra* alongside such works as *Angels in America* and *The Heidi Chronicles*.

Known for previous Portland premieres *Cupid & Psyche* and *Prometheus Bound*, playwright Fisher seems awed to be in such company. "It's incredibly nerve-racking," he says. "Matt and I had to go out to Washington, D.C., and I had to give a speech at an award luncheon. I stood there in front of theater luminaries and politicians, and I thought to myself, 'Is this really happening?' I'm still not convinced that it is."

Those who've read *Tundra* may have been less surprised. It's challenging and powerful, with its stark setting in a place where time appears suspended, or fractured—past and present weave in and out of each other—and characters' lives seem burdened with secrets that must come out or combust.

Award-winning reporter Aurora Mason travels to a small town on the edge of the arctic treeline, far from civilization. The story

Specters in the Arctic

Stark Raving premieres
Kennedy Center honoree *Tundra*

BY GARY MORRIS

she's pursuing is not a simple one. A once-obscure composer, Jon, has written a piece of music that's made him rich and his name a household word. Inexplicably retiring to this desolate place just as fame hits feeds rumors that he plagiarized the piece, and Aurora intends to dig out the truth.

Complicating matters are certain facts: The supposed real author, a young man named Morgan, has vanished and may have been having a romance with Jon. Added to the picture are Morgan's girlfriend, Holly, and Jim, owner of the local drugstore, who, like Jon, both know more than they are initially willing to tell.

The work is the latest collaboration between Fisher and Stark Raving artistic director Zrebski. The two have a partnership that encompasses both the artistic and the personal. Fisher, straight, and Zrebski, gay, are housemates and best friends.

"Artistic relationships are no different from personal ones," says Fisher. "Some are short, some are long, some are big mistakes, and some are meant to be. It's a tough thing to manage from day to day, but Matt and I seem to have pulled it off without chasing each other around with chain saws and axes."

Zrebski says they are the "best of colleagues and the best of friends," adding, "Of course we have our arguments and disagreements artistically, because we are both very passionate."

He estimates they agree 80 percent of the time but welcomes the more volatile 20 percent when they don't as a way to make "better theatrical product."

The two met at Southern Methodist University in 1993 when both entered the school's theater program and quickly bonded. Zrebski was out at the time.

"I came into my sexuality very young," he describes, "coming out to most people by age 17. I was involved with a gay youth organization...participating in political and social activities. Since then I

continue to support queer community causes, though I resist any activities that tend to polarize, believing that change comes best with the infusion of queer people in the 'mainstream' rather than assaulting our opponents with 'shock rhetoric.'"

Tundra reflects this approach. The queer element is part of a larger picture that the play leaves open-ended, inviting viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Still, there's an undeniable appeal to queer audiences. As Zrebski explains: "I think many will identify with the pain in this piece. It should spark some debate about bisexuality and will also ask the question, 'Is it

possible to be too open?' I love stories that deal with what I call 'gray sexuality,' as I believe sexuality is anything but black-and-white."

Gay actor Paul Floding, whose many local roles include the gay doctor in Portland Center Stage's *A New Brain*, plays Jon, the possibly plagiarizing composer. He, too, sees the piece as one about larger questions than queerness, despite the queer motif.

"This is a play about our humanity," he says. "It concerns itself with transcending our fear, guilt and heartbreak. It's about atoning for sins committed in the name of those feelings."

Tundra has presented challenges to both director and actor. According to Zrebski: "The play is very challenging in that it jumps around all over time with no notice given to the audience. That Fisher chose not to tell the story from start to finish makes it much more emotionally jarring."

Floding agrees, adding: "One mistake I made early in the process...was not focusing on the character's physicality immediately. The character is a thinker and a plotter. I got a bit trapped in his head. The director pointed out that I was stomping around like Frankenstein, not giving a physical manifestation to Jon. It wasn't pretty. Luckily, we fixed that."

Floding was also able to tap his own life in

interpreting the character. "I think every queer person who has ever lived in a small town knows the extra isolation being queer can bring. This was the first romantic gay role I ever had...I actually haven't played that many gay roles, so it's rewarding to bring some of my life experience to this character."

Tundra has a strong air of tragedy. Zrebski uses one of the play's lines as his staging inspiration: "The people in my life are like specters floating in and out."

But there are also leavening moments of humor, both broad and black. A recurring gag concerns a seasonal local delicacy called Muktuk, basically the outer covering of a whale. I asked Fisher if he'd ever tried it himself. "I have not now nor have I ever been a Muktuk eater. Nor do I plan on being one. I mean, come on, whale fat? I couldn't in good taste ingest anything that could also be made into fabulous makeup." ■

STARK RAVING THEATRE presents *Tundra*
8 p.m. Thursday to Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday
through May 3 at 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. Tickets
are \$10-\$15 from 503-232-7072 or
www.starkravingtheatre.org.

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer.



Paul Floding (below) and Micah Sunshower Klatt in *Tundra*



Joseph Fisher (left) and Matthew Zrebski on the set of *Tundra*

Dignity in Being You

Sebastian is a boy dyke who came out when he was 14. She says the youth and adult advocates at Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center encouraged him to be who she wanted to be.

"SMYRC was the place where I could go try on any identity that I wanted to. They asked me questions and listened non-judgmentally. They taught me to play pool and be around people of all sorts without being afraid."

Equity Foundation supports organizations such as SMYRC that encourage youth to be themselves, whether they're queer or questioning. Your gift to Equity is an investment in dignity.

Founded in 1989 by Oregon's Gay and Lesbian community. www.equityfoundation.org
Ad sponsored by Marvin Salles, Realtor and Susan Nestor, CPA.

EQUITY
FOUNDATION
Investing in Dignity

PO Box 5696
Portland, OR
97228-5696
503-231-5759

