

THEATER

One to see

Hedwig star says his peace in new rock opera

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE



The many become the One through Aug. 23 at Sylvania Performance Arts Center

Wade McCollum is either one trippin' hippie or some sort of modern prophet. And his new original musical, *One*, is either a groovin' 1960s throwback or zen theater tiptoeing toward nirvana.

Either way, this charismatic queer and his far-out musical enlightened the audience to the point of standing ovation when *Insight Out Theatre Collective* opened its three-week run Aug. 8 at the Performing Arts Center on the Sylvania Campus of Portland Community College.

While starring in the triangle productions! Drammy Award winner *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, McCollum teamed up with Eric Nordin to realize a modern rock-opera retelling of Herman Hesse's Buddhist *Siddhartha*. Think *Hair* and *Godspell* meet *Alice in Wonderland* with a dose of *The Celestine Prophecy* thrown in for synchronicity.

That said, put all preconceptions aside and go. Because although *One* sounds a little (OK, a lot) like an earthy-crunchy, drug-induced, woo-woo, love-and-peace, screw-the-man-and-light-a-candle vigil, it's exactly this anachronistic sensibility that makes the production a hell of a lot of fun. And not in the way you might expect.

One is trippy without being weighed down by the facade of nostalgia. *One* is spiritual without New Age hucksterism. And, over the course of the evening, an intimate and honest (even naive) idealism takes center stage as *One* offers peace in testament rather than rebellion.

Both as director and as protagonist Sid Arthur, McCollum leads an able and energetic company—including a five-piece band—on a personal pilgrimage. With gender-bending best bud, he leaves his two lesbian moms and a future of everyday dreary in search of a way to make peace in the world. But love and happiness remain elusive until Arthur learns the revolution for peace begins within oneself, simply by being at peace.

"Finding peace seems to be at the forefront of many minds these days, and many are capitalizing on that fact," remarks McCollum in an e-mail from Ashland, where he is involved in yet another staging of *Hedwig*. "More and more, I will open a magazine and see the face of someone meditating or someone 'enlightened' and beautiful—and it's an ad for a car or an energy bar or a yoga mat. My yoga mat provides temporary inspiration to practice yoga.... The yoga mat gets stashed in the corner as my

life becomes permeated with breath, alignment and presence. These things can provide inspiration to live more fully, but, ultimately, no yoga mat will bring me closer to truth."

Which is the lesson his character learns as well. Whether through money, power, sex or drugs, Western culture encourages many like Arthur to look outside themselves for peace, love and even God—so much that looking within becomes a challenge. But, says McCollum, "when we do, we see there really is no search. It is all right here, right now. The challenge for me is to maintain that knowingness amidst a traffic jam when I have to pee really badly or I am late for something very important."

Like the original *Siddhartha*, McCollum's modern-day parable flows as a dreamy river, undulating between the illusion of reality and the reality of illusion.

"Sid finds stillness among the maelstrom of modern society," explains McCollum, who began writing the musical when he was 13. "Sid goes through the world of senses and desire—learning from the world of flesh and suffering and eventually ceasing the search for truth and discovering what has been inside all along."

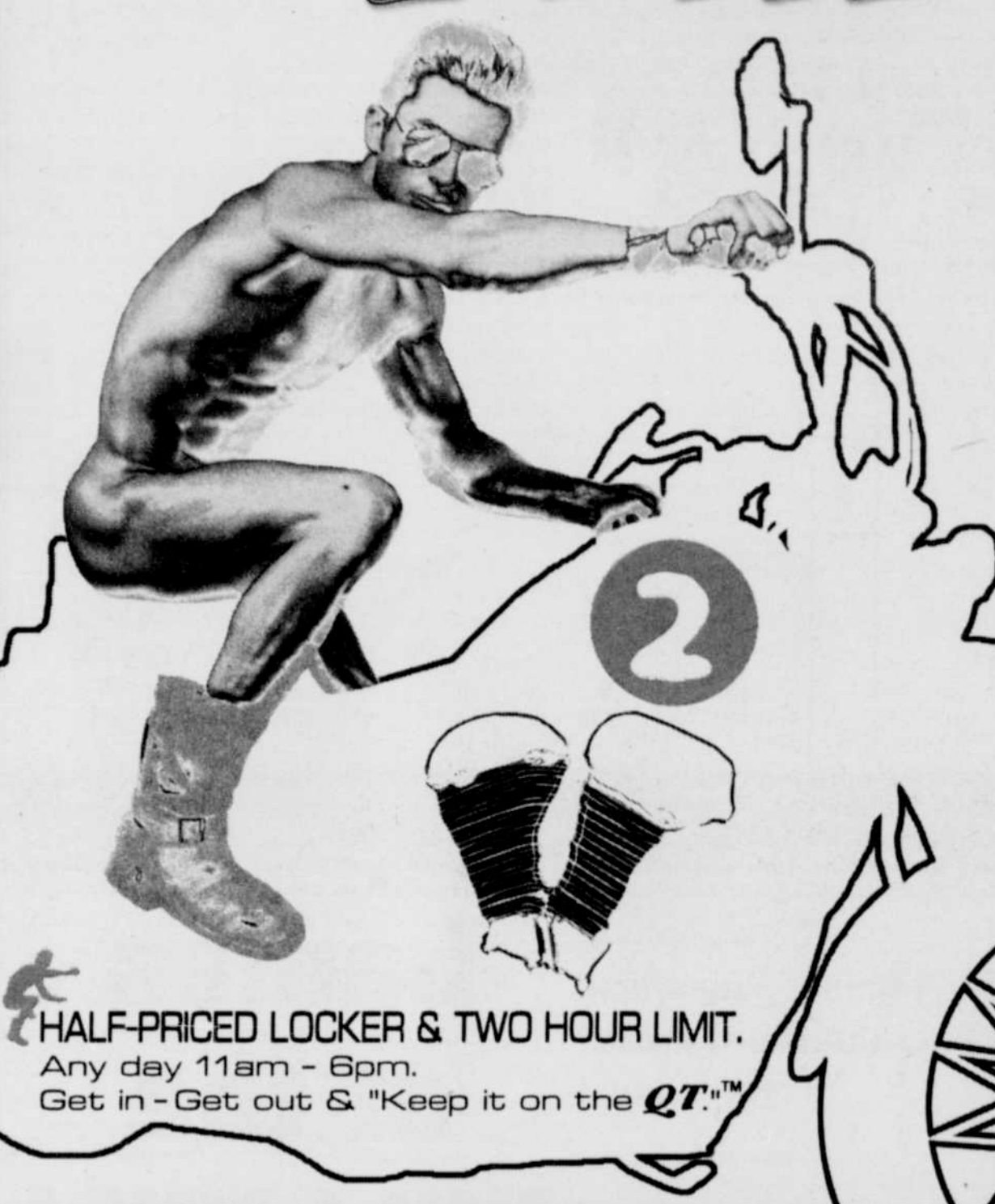
Conceptually, the play may suffer from its abstract philosophy, but, fortunately, the experience isn't alienating. "Oneness is a very slippery subject to write about because of the nature of words," admits McCollum. "It is hard to contain such ideas in language.... Throughout *One*, we explore separation, duality, class, corporate rule, love, loss, consumer culture and the capitalization of spirituality...the idea that we can buy tools for enlightenment."

The plot of *One* drags in a few minor spots, but the book is smart without being too clever. And while a few performers reach a little beyond their means, both score and ensemble are appealing and fulfilling without being cute or cloying. In fact, the most notable disappointment was the lack of an encore to send the audience out humming.

The message, however, could be heard loud and clear: We are the message, we are the story and, as McCollum puts it, "One drop in the ocean changes the whole." □

ONE plays 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday through Aug. 23 at Portland Community College's Sylvania Performance Arts Center, 12000 S.W. 49th Ave. Tickets are \$10-\$15 sliding scale from 503-234-0973.

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