

CULTURE

Now that's big

Grant High pulls off feminism, '80s glam and drag queens—with no complaints

BY BART CHURCH

Sometimes heroes don't carry a gun, sometimes victories don't make headlines, and sometimes miracles happen in the most unlikely of places.

Last month Grant High School's Performing Arts Department brought to the stage one of the oldest plays in the Western canon, Aeschylus' tragedy *The Women Suppliants*, updated as a very modern, very controversial and very magical '80s musical, *Big Love* (by New York historian and playwright Charles Mee).

Drama teacher Trisha Todd (who you will remember as Claire in the 1992 film *Claire of the Moon*), assisted by amazing choreographer Judith Rizzio (who is also public affairs director at Our House of Portland), a cast of more than 50 absolutely energized student actors and a solid tech crew, managed to tell a story about love, justice, powerful women and drag queens that was so moving and funny, it restored my hope that art can make a difference in this insane world.

Great stories well told will always restore our faith in the power of love—not silly, romantic love, but *Big Love*—a love that allows 49 brides to brutally kill their husbands on their collective wedding night; a love that casts a drag queen as a powerful, sad and fabulous voice of the Gods; and a love that makes room for two guys in drag to close the show with a tap duet. In a high school play.

This is not the *Guys & Dolls* retreat you saw in high school. It grapples head-on with ancient and all-too-relevant issues: women's rage at the violence of men, the impossible constraints of being a woman (or a man), the need for war and violence, how to re-create Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon" in a Greek tragedy without dishonoring the genius of Aeschylus or Boy George.

Grant's production not only dealt with these issues, but it also allowed its high school and middle school student and parent audiences to feel the tragedy, hope and absurdity of trying to love and be just in a world gone mad. And best of all, it gave girls and queens the right to be strong.

"The adults involved with the production were initially worried about the drag elements, but the kids said, 'Who cares?' " Todd tells me on the show's final weekend. "They really supported...cast members who played these parts. The kids get it. It's just not

a big issue for them. Frankly, we were more worried about the play's use of pagan imagery and ritual, as well as its celebration of powerful girls and their right to choose to love and be the way their heart guides them."

In the end, Todd needn't have worried. "These issues, too, didn't faze the amazing parents, faculty and administration at Grant."

Indeed, when asked if she had received any complaints about the production, principal Toni Hunter said: "Not a one. The show is about today's issues. I received nothing but positive comments...I personally saw it four times. We are very proud of the work the students and volunteers did with the show."

Todd, who identifies as lesbian, notes that her "biggest draw" in staging *Big Love* was that the work is "very empowering to girls. The last thing a young girl these days would say is that she is a feminist. That is tantamount to saying she is a bully. The right [wing] has been successful in making it completely unattractive to be a powerful girl. As a result, girls often are very concerned about how they are perceived, and they lose sight of their own desires.... This play says we always have a choice, can always follow our heart, even if the consequences aren't

what we want. This play says be who you are, love who you love."

Todd also likes the updating of the classic text and thought students would, too. "The '80s music is great because on the surface it is really light and fun, but there is often a subtext that is really dark and sad. You have to remember the '80s were the time of...Adam Ant, glam rock and Reagan and AIDS."

It's difficult to single out only a few in a courageous student production full of actors who crossed gender and age lines to do things they never thought they could, in a show where the big wedding scene (50 brides and 50 grooms) is a bacchanalia danced to

"Love Shack." *Big Love* was the epitome of a talented ensemble cast.

Brett Mustard, 18, who dared to play Dionysus and the drag queen Guiliano as a senior in high school, did so with an enormous amount of grace and sensitivity, particularly during a soulful monologue about an older man who loved him and who he regretfully rejected.

Some characters were double cast, with student actors trading places between performances.

In the production I saw, Jessica Harris portrayed the powerful Thyona with authenticity and complexity, and Jake Reckford managed to embody the character Nikos' contradictions and humanity.

Rosa Olsen-McKenzie, who played the old mother, Bella, embodied the heart and soul of the show when she said: "Love trumps all. Love is the highest law. It can be bound by no other. Love of another human being, man or woman, it cannot be wrong."

When you don't have children in school, you sometimes might wonder where your taxes are going. Based on this production and the more than 100 students, parents and volunteers who worked day and night and the hundreds of audience members (including one proud grandmother who flew in from Omaha, Neb., to see her opera-loving

son, AJ Glueckert, do a brilliant job), we are buying a miracle.

Grant is trying to rebuild its crumbling, historic auditorium, which was featured in the famous movie about the power of high school art, *Mr. Holland's Opus*. If the spirit of giving grabs you this season, write a check—it may be the best investment you'll ever make in queer and human liberation.

And thank the gods for public schools like Grant. If drag queens and strong women are allowed be stars in high school, they just might grow up to run the world. **J**

To make a donation, send checks to GRANT HIGH SCHOOL THEATER RENOVATION in care of Trisha Todd, 2245 N.E. 36th Ave., Portland, OR 97212.



Trisha Todd and Brett Mustard created *Big Love* at Grant High School

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—Trisha Todd



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