

enough good roles for women in theater," she asserts. Her hope is that by encouraging playwrights, more women-focused work will be produced. With *Emergence*, Soderberg intends to empower women on stage—and off.

One of those women is Portland playwright Sandra de Helen, a 60-year-old lesbian who has been writing plays for three decades. Her 10-minute piece *Burning Up* premieres July 18 at *Emergence*.

De Helen's short farce finds the character of playwright Tennessee Williams stranded on the balcony of a burning building in New Orleans. Homoeroticism runs rampant as do other passions when a Russian spy, a young Greek god, a female prostitute and a Southern belle all join Williams amid the flames.

De Helen writes about all kinds of people, gay and not so. "It just depends on what grabs me," she says. "I try to write about characters."

She does see the need, however, for more and better roles for queers on stage. Like Soderberg, de Helen says women are still

struggling to make a mark as directors and playwrights.

Recent statistics corroborate de Helen and Soderberg's perceptions. According to *American Theater Magazine*, in the 2001-2002 season, only 17 percent of playwrights and only 16 percent of directors hired by off-Broadway and regional theaters were women.

De Helen, who started her own women's theaters in the 1970s and '80s, is pleased to see a new generation of women-run theaters like *Radiant* cropping up. "I'm grateful for Anna," she says. "She's a really enthusiastic, young visionary. She's so committed to women. And she's an excellent director as well."

The admiration runs both ways. Soderberg lauds de Helen for her multitude of work and directed the 2002 Stark Raving Theatre production of de Helen's *Witch!*, based on a true story about a lesbian Wiccan who encounters discrimination because of her spirituality.

Soderberg says she's interested in seeing more plays like *Witch!* in which a queer character's sexuality is not the main theme of the play. "I'm interested in plays about lesbians being people," she notes.

"Being people" is core to Soderberg's vision of theater in general. "To be human is to be an actor," she says. "We act every day, and we often don't realize we're playing a role."

De Helen adds that theater is "a community event. It doesn't happen without an audience," which "is part of the special something happening right then, in real time. It's never going to happen in exactly that way again."

Nor will *Emergence* happen the same way. Next year Soderberg will open the field nationally to any playwright with work that includes strong women characters. Eventually, she wants the festival to invite playwrights (of any gender) from around the world.

As for *Radiant*, she says they will keep doing "old plays in new ways," which includes stirring up the gender soup. "When we do *Hamlet* [in 2006], we plan on doing a lot of gender-bending," she says. "And who knows with *Jesus Christ Superstar*?"

Jesus in drag? The mystery will be revealed in May 2005 at a theater near you. ☐

Visit *RADIANT THEATRE* at www.radianttheatre.org.

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The schedule emergeth

Emergence: The Second Annual Portland Women's Playwright Festival takes place July 17 to 19 at CoHo Theatre, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. All shows are free.

• **2 p.m. July 17:** Have reality shows taken over the airwaves and commandeered our better senses? A small, persevering cast of characters fight back against the ratings-driven network machine in *One Night on Mars* by Madge Zaiko of Portland. Directed by Helena de Crespo.

• **2 p.m. July 18:** Tennessee Williams comes out on the balcony of a burning building in the French Quarter during Mardi Gras in *Burning Up* by Sandra de Helen of Portland. Cast includes Michael Teufel and Steve Brian. Two hilarious absurdist stories explore the collusion between Hollywood and the government to create winning propaganda in *Spies and Other Governmental Dysfunctions* by Victoria Vidal of North Hollywood, Calif. Both shows directed by Tamara Carroll.

• **7:30 p.m. July 19:** Tom is gone, but his fatal accident leads to a series of complex deceptions—while a wounded woman's manipulation of relationships spins dangerously out of control—in *Tom's Girls* by Elena Naskova of Los Angeles. Brilliant scientist Wanda is about to get married, but before she can, she has to let go of her obsession—saving planet earth—in *Major Issues* by Shirley King of Benicia, Calif. Both shows directed by Amy Gray.

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