

THEATER



Playwright-in-residence
Amy Wheeler plans
to change the world
one kiss at a time

Kiss and tell

Stark Raving's season opener encourages connection

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Matt Zrebski is a man on a mission. As artistic director of Stark Raving Theatre, one of a handful of companies in the United States that focuses exclusively on new plays, the gay writer/director is looking for an audience that wants to be stimulated and challenged, as well as entertained.

With three of this season's offerings dealing with themes that are specifically relevant to our community, Zrebski hopes that queer audiences fit that bill. Season opener *Kiss It!* is a five-character piece written by Seattle lesbian playwright and Stark Raving playwright-in-residence Amy Wheeler.

Zrebski, who moved to Portland from Texas in 1997 in response to a search "for a city similar to Austin that was as far away from Texas as I could ever get," describes *Kiss It!* as a "full-on ranting love letter to this crazy world."

In the midst of preproduction, I caught up with Zrebski, who is directing *Kiss It!*, and Wheeler to talk about the new play.

Floyd Sklaver: What are the work's issues?

Amy Wheeler: It's a play about broken-hearted and confused people learning to love themselves...and each other. It tackles the rampant cynicism of our time and exposes how cynicism keeps us from connecting with each other and, ultimately, leads to anger and despair...and loss of hope—and how simple it is to reach out of our own cramped little dramas to touch someone else.

FS: Tell me about the characters.

Matthew Zrebski: The characters are a male-to-female transsexual; a 40-year old gay man out of the ACT UP generation of the '80s; a closeted, 24-year-old born-again Christian; his twin sister, a stripper; an 18-year-old pansexual street kid; and the Wild Woman.

The idea is that there is a wild woman living in the woods protecting the heart of the world. She's dying, but she selects these five to come into her world to give them hope and the opportunity to give back to the earth by stopping their cynicism, bitterness and fear.

FS: What made you write this right now?

AW: I think a message of love in the face of cynicism, hope in the face of despair, kissing instead of hurting, told through a story that celebrates queerness in all its fantastic, complex, confusing, ridiculous, childlike,

unabashed, sexy glory, is revolutionary. But maybe I'm wrong.... Ask George Bush.

FS: It's a musical, right?

MZ: It's not a musical but a play with songs, like Shakespeare and Brecht wrote plays with songs. When you use singing to express words, you can get to the core of the emotion very quickly....The songs allow the characters to express something they otherwise wouldn't.

FS: How would you describe the style?

AW: It's all over the map in a very intentional and fun way. We call the first part "Shock and Awe"—a comic assault on our sensibilities. It's fast, funny, over the top, pushing political hot buttons with absolute glee! The second part moves into magical territory—a sort of fable landscape where the characters have to slow down and really look at themselves. So, let's see...*Angels in America* meets *Into the Woods* meets *Moulin Rouge*. How's that?

FS: What does the title mean?

AW: Kiss it...and make it feel better. Kiss off. Kiss this. Kiss me. Kiss of life. Kiss of death. Kiss of transformation.

MZ: There's so much kissing on stage that we actually have a Listerine policy; the actors rinse with it during rehearsals to try to keep colds down.

FS: What do you hope to accomplish with this play?

MZ: I think queer people are going to love this play because it talks about the issues that affect us...especially now when we have to fight Measure 36. Anger can be a good motivator, but if you operate from anger or fear when you are trying to get things done politically or socially, you perpetuate the hate cycle.

People hate for a reason. We need to acknowledge where they are coming from, their history, then move to a place of agreement. This play deals with empathy and fully embracing each other to learn where the other person has walked.

AW: I hope to change the world—one kiss at a time. 

Stark Raving Theatre, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St., presents *KISS IT!* 8 p.m. Thursday to Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday through Oct. 16. Tickets are \$10-\$18 from 503-232-7072. Proceeds from the Sept. 24 performance benefit the No on 36 campaign. Tickets are \$50.

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