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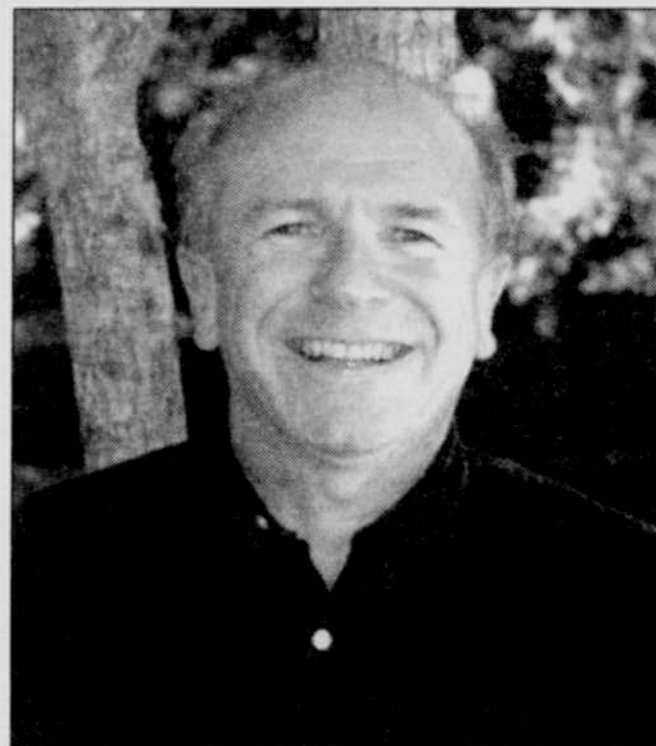
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THEATER

Totally Terence

Theater dedicates entire season to gay scribe

BY FLOYD SKLAVER



Terence McNally will be in town early next year for the Portland Arts & Lectures series

Few playwrights capture the nuances of the gay experience like Terence McNally, and even fewer appeal to mainstream audiences.

From his first Broadway hit in 1975—*The Ritz*, a door-slammng farce set in a Manhattan bathhouse—the prolific McNally has written plays that reflect his identity as a gay man. “When I’m writing,” he says, “I try to think about the difficulty of people connecting as they’re trying to find hope, trying to find their way to real love and commitment.”

McNally is the most important gay playwright since Tennessee Williams. In fact, he may even be more important since his plays speak more openly of homosexuality. He has been writing plays and musicals for more than 40 years, and now Portland’s Profile Theatre Project is devoting its entire season to the Tony-winning playwright with productions and staged readings that span his entire career.

The season opens Oct. 8 with McNally’s latest play, *The Stendhal Syndrome*. Stendhal’s syndrome is a malaise first mentioned by the French author of *The Red and the Black*, which can involve swooning or feeling faint. It occurs when one suffers a sensory overload in the presence of a work of art. Direct from its New York premiere, the evening consists of two one-acts about the transformative power of art.

In the first, “Full Frontal Nudity,” an Italian tour guide urges three U.S. tourists to bask in the beauty of Michelangelo’s “David.” This leads to an examination of their feelings, memories and dreams. In the second, “Prelude & Liebestod,” a celebrated conductor watches his life unravel as he leads the opening and closing pieces of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde.” The conductor believes that the passionate music can only attain its full potential when one gives one’s soul over to it completely; as the performance progresses, he is swept away by his own reactions of love and lust.

Next up is the staged reading of a collection of McNally’s one-acts called *Three from Column A* (Oct. 25 and 26 and Nov. 1 and 2). Never before produced together, these timely, politically charged anti-war gems from the 1960s are McNally’s response to Vietnam. They are dark and moving, and also very funny. “Next” is about an overweight middle-aged man called in for a physical; “Bringing It All Back Home” is about a family awaiting the coffin of their all-American son who was killed in action; and in “Botticelli,” two soldiers in the jungle play a word game as they wait for the enemy to emerge.

The second fully staged offering is *The Lisbon Traviata* (Jan. 14 to Feb. 20, 2005), McNally’s cautionary tale of sexual jealousy and obsession. Full of insider jokes and ribald one-liners, it’s the story of the disintegration of an eight-year relationship between two gay men. McNally described it as “an opera buffa that ends up a verismo tragedy,” which is opera-speak for comedy and drama.

Shortly after the opening of *Traviata*, McNally comes to town Jan. 19, 2005, for the Portland Arts & Lectures series. To kick off the

evening, Profile will perform a selection from *Three from Column A*.

The other fully staged production of the season is *It’s Only a Play* (April 15 to May 22, 2005), a work that showcases McNally’s ability to combine brilliant wit with searing intimacy. *Play* is a hilarious sendup of the theater that uses the occasion of a disastrous opening night party to pile one wildly funny comic sequence upon another.

The action takes place in the lavish townhouse of a Broadway producer. A neurotic young author, an unstable director and the pill-popping leading lady, among others, are hunkered down waiting for the reviews. When the reviews arrive (all bad, of course), the guests become cattier (and therefore funnier) as they attempt to pin the blame on each other.

McNally effectively captures the narcissism, ambition, childishness and irrationality of the theater, and it’s fun to speculate whether this play is similar to one of his own experiences. (His first Broadway play, *The Lady of the Camellias*, ran for only 13 performances in 1963.)

Profile’s season closes with a staged reading of the controversial *Corpus Christi* (May 23 and 24, 2005). Originally produced off-Broadway in 1997, *Christi* is a modern-day retelling of Jesus’ birth, ministry and death in which both he and his disciples are gay.

The play’s New York premiere was initially canceled because of death threats against board members of the Manhattan Theater Club, its producer. However, several prominent playwrights, including Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), threatened to withdraw their plays if *Corpus Christi* wasn’t produced. When the play finally opened, theatergoers were besieged by almost 2,000 protesters and had to pass through metal detectors before entering the auditorium. Given the political climate today, Portlanders may expect more of the same. [T]

THE STENDHAL SYNDROME plays Oct. 8 through Nov. 14 at Theater Theatre, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$12-\$25 from 503-242-0080.

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