

PEOPLE

Avenue Q & A

Tony Award winner returns to Oregon for No on 36 benefit

BY JIM RADOSTA

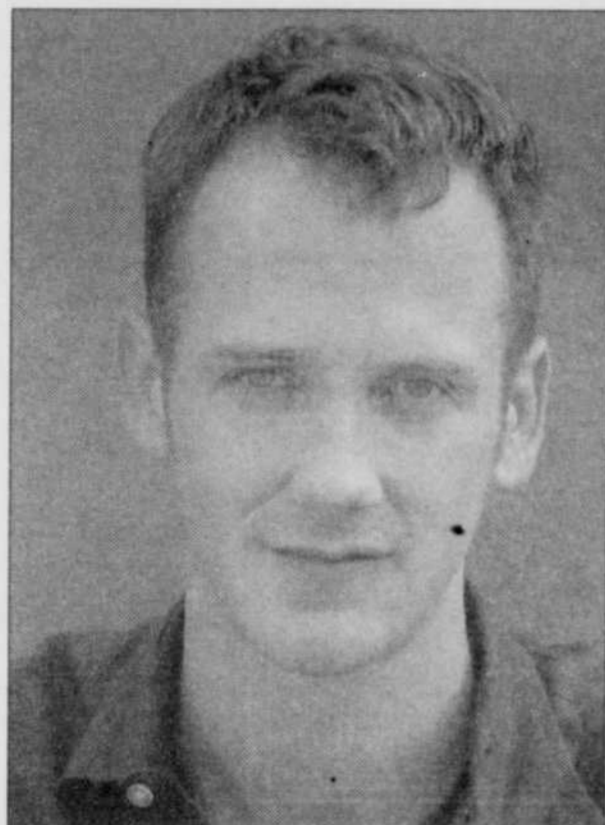
When a gay guy from a small town wins a Tony Award, you'd naturally expect him to move on to bigger and better places and never look back.

Not Jeff Whitty. In fact, the Coos Bay native is delighted to be hearing from old friends ever since he took home the Best Book of a Musical trophy June 6 for *Avenue Q*—which, on the surface, appears to be a novelty Muppet show for adults but deep down is a sincere story about regaining idealism and finding one's purpose in life.

The 33-year-old spoke with *Just Out* about his past life as a University of Oregon frat boy, his upcoming benefit for the No on Constitutional Amendment 36 campaign and the "arranged marriage" that led to widespread acclaim.

Jim Radosta: How did you escape Coos Bay?

Jeff Whitty: I went to college...at the U of O. I started off in a fraternity. I left the fraternity my sophomore year—actually not having anything to do with being gay. The Iraq war was going on, and I was beginning to



Jeff Whitty will discuss *Avenue Q* Oct. 3 at Theater Theatre



realize I had major philosophical differences with these people. Then I came out.

JR: Did your family take that OK?

JW: Yeah, they took it really well. My little brother is gay, too, and came out shortly after me, so they sort of had a double whammy. It took them maybe a day to adjust, and they've been really supportive ever since. There was a PFLAG

contingent in this year's Coos Bay Fun Festival parade, and they were in it.

JR: How did you come up with the concept of *Avenue Q*?

JW: I was just winding down my 20s, and at that stage in life you expect everything to be resolving itself, and instead you're still faced with more questions than you've ever had. It was just a lot of banging my head against the wall, kind of going crazy because I wasn't getting a break.

The [*Avenue Q*] songwriters had written a TV pilot, and the producers of the show saw it and wanted to make it into a stage musical, so then I came on board to work on the book—the libretto aspect of the show. I didn't know them beforehand, so it was a very interesting experience creatively.

JR: Did you guys work closely together from there on out?

JW: It was this funny arranged marriage. We laugh about it now, but we really did not get along terribly well. We all had different things we needed out of the show, and it kind of became a hybrid of what everyone wanted—in a good way. But I wasn't used to collaborating as a playwright, and they'd never written a full-length stage musical before. People see the show and say, "Gosh, it must've been so much fun to write," and it wasn't, really. [Laughs] It's really hard to make something seem simple.

JR: How does it feel to be returning to Oregon amid this contentious time politically?

JW: Well, I'm so glad to be able to come back and help fight this ballot measure. I was knocking on doors in Springfield about [1992's] Measure 9. You feel helpless in New York, where there's a sense that those battles have been fought already, and I don't think there's quite an awareness that it's very much alive in other parts of the country and that there's...this amazing group of people that circle their wagons and fight it every year.

JR: What's been the highlight of all the acclaim you've received?

JW: When I moved here 11 years ago, I used to always walk through the Broadway theater district and look at the marquees and see who was in what show, and it's still sort of mind-blowing that I have a marquee of something I wrote that's up there.

And then with the whole Tony thing, the coolest part was all the people that I'd lost touch with that I thought I'd probably never talk to again—so many people reappeared in my life, and they're just so warm and supportive. Even people from the fraternity. It was really great because I got to reconnect with the past a bit. ☐

AVENUE Q & A, featuring a conversation with Jeff Whitty and performances from his Tony-winning musical, starts 5 p.m. Oct. 3 at Theater Theatre, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$50 when you mention *Just Out* from 971-244-1399. A limited number of discounted tickets for students and starving actors are available for \$25 and a pledge of 25 volunteer hours with the No on 36 campaign.

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This is a benefit. 36% of all proceeds will be donated to Basic Rights Oregon for the No on 36 campaign.

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