

Scene 1: Marie is unconscious in a hospital room, and her partner, Cassie, is not allowed in to see her. Betsy, a friend from church, has come to lend support and witnesses the distress this causes Cassie. Fortunately, Marie wakes up and is able to request Cassie's presence.

Scene 2: Marie and Cassie decide to get married so they can have the legal rights and responsibilities—like hospital visitation—associated with marriage. It is March 2004, and Multnomah County is issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples. When Cassie invites Betsy to attend the wedding, Betsy declines, saying she does not believe in gay marriage.

These are just a few of the complex situations explored in a new play developed by Jeannie LaFrance to encourage dialogue within Christian churches on the issue of same-sex marriage. The play invites audience members to "intervene" in the action and try to come up with different outcomes.

Five years ago LaFrance founded Act for Action, a nonprofit organization that helps community groups resolve issues around social justice through the use of theater. Her social change theater is based on a model first devised by Brazilian director and activist Augusto Boal. Boal established the Theater of the Oppressed in the early 1970s as a way of helping people learn how to fight back against oppression and problem-solve as a group.

LaFrance works with organizations to create plays that "pose a problem" and allow the groups to develop solutions. In the case of her new play, *A Leap of Faith*, that problem is the fictional situation in which two members of a

A LEAP OF FAITH— AND UNDERSTANDING

Act for Action promotes social justice through the use of theater

by Meg Daly

Christian congregation, Marie and Cassie, want to get married. But not everyone in their church is supportive of them.

The 11-minute play is performed one time with a sad and unfortunate ending. (Cassie and Marie don't make it to the licensing office in time and then find out that Marie is very ill and not accepted under Cassie's insurance plan.)

Then it is performed again. This time, audience members can stop the action when they see a problem. An audience member can come on stage to stand in for a character he or she believes could create a positive solution. LaFrance serves as a facilitator for this process. Whether or not the audience intervention succeeds, the drama allows participants to see multiple ways of addressing an issue.

"It creates community dialogue through theater," says LaFrance, who has been doing social change theater for more than 15 years. She was a finalist for the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World award in 2002 and was



Actors Terrie Quinteros (left) and Joy Misra in *A Leap of Faith*

named by *The Portland Observer* as a "Woman of Courage and Vision."

"Theater can get to people on an emotional level... [It] helps people connect to each other in a different way," she says.

LaFrance developed the play last year during the emotional aftermath of same-sex marriages in Multnomah County. She knew firsthand the tensions that Christian churches face. Even though her church, Ainsworth United Church of Christ, is an open and affirming congregation, not all

members were entirely comfortable with the fact that she and her female partner got married.

Working in collaboration with Love Makes a Family and the Community of Welcoming Congregations, she set about creating a play in which no one was the oppressor, per se. Instead, many different viewpoints are expressed and given credence. Act for Action recently received grants from McKenzie River Gathering Foundation and the Regional Arts and Culture Council to perform the play 20 times in Portland-area churches.

The first performance was at LaFrance's own church in October. The Rev. Lynne Smouse López says the play was received "with great applause and appreciation." She praises Act for Action for not imposing an opinion but rather encouraging congregants "to express their thoughts, opinions and convictions."

In a letter to other ministers who may be considering having the play performed in their churches, López notes: "We will be challenged in the months and years ahead to honestly discuss our differing opinions and to listen, read and reflect upon our Christian faith and what our faith impels us to do."

This is exactly the kind of dialogue LaFrance wants to promote.

"The play gets people to ask: 'What are my values? What do I really believe about how all people should be treated?'"

If you think your church or organization might be interested in booking an ACT FOR ACTION performance, contact Jeannie LaFrance at 503-287-9628, ext. 2, info@actforaction.org or www.actforaction.org. The play can be modified for more secular venues and organizations.

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