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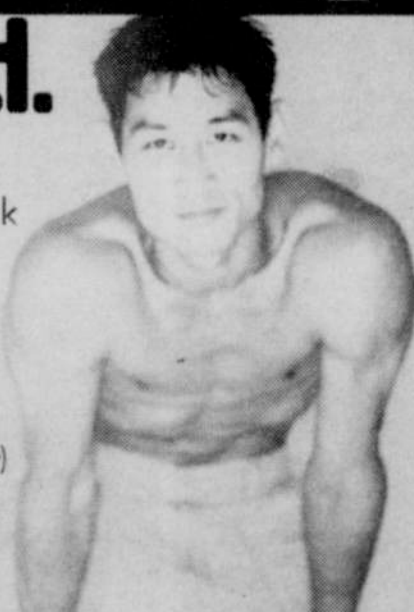
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THEATER

Heaven and hell

Progressive productions portray the passion of the Christ—and the Antichrist

Jesus Christ Superstar

Sure, theater can be a moving experience. But how often does theater literally move you? Radiant Theatre, a 3-year-old troupe, rejects the convention that audiences should sit still. In its new production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the company stages Andrew Lloyd Webber's early '70s rock opera all over the building. Don't wear those hot new high heels, because you'll be traipsing from scene to scene to witness the last seven days of Jesus Christ's life.

The Vespiary

Despite big budgets and slick production values, horror films rarely generate real terror in audiences these days.

It's even harder for a small theater company, working with a spare stage and flesh-and-bone actors, to scare the pants off you. But Stark Raving Theatre's *The Vespiary* manages to do just that.

Directed by Kristan Seemel (Defunkt Theatre's *A Murder of Crows*), the chilling sus-

pense drama takes place mostly in Kenton, Texas, a small town with a Bible-banging preacher (gay thesp Gary Norman, last seen in Theatre Vertigo's *A Bright Room Called Day*) ranting about imminent evil. As if that's not unnerving enough for queers, gay playwright Matthew B. Zrebski (*After the Zipper*) cranks up the supernatural shock and awe.

The object of Brother Lyle's scorn is Luke (Shaun Patrick Hennessy, last seen as Miss Deep South in Triangle Productions' *Pageant*), a loner with extraordinary healing powers who thinks he's the



Dan Poston (left) crosses paths with DeLonde Bell in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

DeLonde Bell, a 32-year-old who brings some queer subtext to the role of Jesus, gave *Just Out* the skinny on this novel staging. "We're turning theater into an alternate universe," he said. "People feel engaged physically and mentally. You're sure as hell not going to be bored."

Born and raised in Chicago, Bell studied music at DePaul University and moved to Portland in 1999. When he's not portraying the Savior, he works in the computer industry and plays drums in a goth-rock band called Once in the Sun.

Bell voiced an aversion to labels when the topic of his sexuality came up. He did say, however, that he qualifies as a "three" on the Kinsey scale.

He admitted that, prior to this production, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was never one of his favorites. "I used to think it was hokey, a dated product of its generation," he said.

But in studying the music and the lyrics, he started liking the piece. "No, it's not a complex work, but without question it is Andrew Lloyd Webber's best score." He also praised Tim Rice's lyrics.

Bell's goal in life is to "rock without fear." Assessing the possible pitfalls of this unusual production, he demonstrated his bad-ass potential by saying: "The biggest risk is pissing off the critics. If that's our biggest risk, I don't care."

Jesus Christ Superstar plays 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through April 24 at Gresham Little Theater, 30639 S.E. Bluff Road, and from April 29 to May 8 at Scarlett Ballroom, 700 N.E. Dekum St. Tickets are \$8-\$15 from 503-502-8261 or www.radianttheatre.org

—Stephen Blair



Mario Calcagno (left) catches hell from Shaun Patrick Hennessy in *The Vespiary*.

Antichrist. When bullies beat up his high school pal Dustin (Mario Calcagno), Luke nurses him back to health with a lengthy liplock.

Years later—the story unfolds in an intriguing nonlinear fashion—Lyle's daughter, Ruth (Erin Matley), begs Luke to cure her leukemia, but her fundamentalist father insists on praying away the pain. After succumbing to the disease, her ghost haunts him forever.

Meanwhile, a dying Luke summons Dustin to come see him and resolve a mystery from the past. Although this final plot twist leads to many loose ends, it's worth the frustration just to experience a night at the theater that will leave you, quite literally, breathless.

The Vespiary plays 8 p.m. Thursdays to Saturdays and 7 p.m. Sundays through April 30 at 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. Tickets are \$10-\$18 from 503-232-7072; Thursdays are "pay what you can."

—Jim Radosta