

THEATER

Stage sage

Actor Michael Mendelson muses on life in Portland theater

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

"Once you make the conscious choice, all the serendipitous things happen after that," advises Michael Mendelson, a professional stage actor for whom such consequences have led him to a home and career in Portland theater.

Growing up a middle child of three in Detroit, his parents wanted him to study architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But Mendelson chose a different path, enrolling instead in the Wayne State theater program. Although his passion for the stage earned him generous time in the spotlight, it wasn't until grad school at University of Washington that he acquired a more grounded foundation in rigors of voice and movement—traditional instruction that Mendelson says many young actors today disregard.

His current role in Miracle Theatre's language-intensive *Fuente Ovejuna* illustrates the importance of harnessing the movement of language and the language of movement. "When you can't understand one word from another, you have a problem," he emphasizes. "If you can't hear the words, if you don't know what they're saying, then you're lost. If people don't know how their body moves in space, they're lost."

Ultimately, he contends, it's a lack of interest in craft.

"It's a living, breathing thing we do, and you can't wake up, get out of bed, have a cup of coffee, hit the stage and expect to be good," he says. "I see many young people moving into theater in this town who have very lazy mouths, who think that they don't need to work at what they're doing, that what they have is enough. And I say, what you have is not enough. It's never enough. You can always strive to be better if you want to be."

Which explains why Mendelson made the risky choice in 1999 to abandon his well-established, no-need-to-audition, two-time Drammy-winning career on Portland stages for a bite of the Big Apple. While in New York, he worked at notable places such as Lincoln Center's Clark Studio Theatre. But he also landed out-of-town gigs that packed him off to regional theaters. After one stint worked him away from his partner for 76 days, it was an easier (but no less risky) choice to return to Portland, where the couple could settle down to nest.

"It made me a better actor and a fuller human being to get out of Portland and experience what the theatrical world

in New York is about," Mendelson acknowledges. "I needed to be stretched. I wanted to get a lot of input and experiences that I hadn't had before in my life. My acting has changed. I think I'm even more in the moment and more present onstage, and I know myself better as a human being, too."

He's also set new limits for himself, making a choice nowadays to focus on only one creative project at a time rather than risk jeopardizing a production by overextending himself. "Actors feel they can't say no," explains Mendelson, who, even as a union actor, holds a full-time job as manager of Russell Street BBQ.

"There's a real fear that if you say no to something, you'll never work again." But that hasn't been a problem for Mendelson, whose résumé includes several notable milestones.

"Bent was done during [1992's] No on 9 campaign," he notes. "Not only emotionally was it a huge show, but politically. People would sit on the curb of the street outside of the old Paris Theatre where we did it and sob at intermission." An intensive *Jeffrey* pushed Mendelson into therapy.

"At that point, I would consider myself a very young actor in that it was very hard for me to figure out how to leave the show at the theater and then go home into my life," he says. "Now, as an adult actor, I know how to leave the show at the theater. And I know that that's my character, and to differentiate between that and the person that I am."

A third milestone was *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, a contemporary gay play by Terrence McNally that was markedly different from his college experi-

ence with *The Boys in the Band*, a gay classic that led him to come out to his brother. Mendelson says, "The guys [in *Boys in the Band*] are so nasty to each other and themselves. We as gay men have come so far from that, that I was grateful for the opportunity to play John and James, the identical twins, with a new understanding of what the sensibilities were of the gay men of the '90s and the new millennium."

Mendelson appreciates today's more diverse gay canon.

"There is gay theater that makes us proud of who we are and raises us to another level," observes Mendelson, "and gay theater that is a guilty pleasure. My problem with [the latter] is if you do too much of it, that's all that people have expectation for. It's part of the dumbing of America. We're at a point now in our society that there's a place for theater for entertainment's sake, but I have to say that I personally have to draw the line at certain things."

Above that line he places playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Larry Kramer and Paula Vogel—and, of course, McNally, who happens to be the current focus of Profile Theatre's unique single-playwright season in which Mendelson recently appeared as Stephen in *The Lisbon Traviata* and is cast to read *Corpus Christi*.

"One thing I love about Terrence's writing is that he writes relationships, whether they are men and women, women and women, or men and men. He writes about the human condition. The fact that they're gay men really doesn't play a part in it—that's just a given circumstance. I don't think there's any difference in playing a gay role or a straight role. Love is love. Hate is hate."

And villains are fun to play. "You have license to do anything. It's much harder to play a role that is closer to the bone. *Fuente Ovejuna* is pretty far from me, and yet all of those things that I have to cover in *Fuente Ovejuna*—arrogance, violence, strength, shame, self-blindness—all of that stuff lies in me. It's just choosing to bring that to the surface and letting the rest of me go." ■

Miracle Theatre Group presents FUENTE OVEJUNA 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through May 14 at 525 S.E. Stark St. Tickets are \$14-\$17 from 503-236-7253.

Profile Theatre Project concludes its Terrence McNally season with a staged reading of CORPUS CHRISTI 7 p.m. May 23 and 24 at 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$10-\$15 from 503-242-0080.

When not applauding local theater, TIMOTHY KRAUSE is communications coordinator for City Club of Portland.

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Michael Mendelson stars in Miracle Theatre's *Fuente Ovejuna* with, from left, Jennifer Hartman, JR Wickman and Amaya Villazan.

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