

THEATER

Making a scene

Queer-themed theater lit up many Portland stages this past season, but will it take home any Drammys?

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

Victorian lesbians bickered in David Mamet's *Boston Marriage* over at CoHo. A gay anarchist resisted 1930s Berlin in Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day* at Vertigo. Stark Raving's *Kiss It!* and *Cold Comedy Concoction* featured a whole range of sexual minorities.

In fact, so many Portland stages got so much queer booty this past season that we all should probably be enjoying a cigarette right about now.

With the annual Drammy Awards for outstanding theater waiting in the wings to reunite us with all of our one-night stands, here are a few crib notes to help remember what gay ol' times we had.

Except, of course, for the loss of **Dennis Bigelow**, who died March 29 at age 52. He was the first producer and a frequent director at Portland Center Stage (back when it was an offshoot of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival) and later artistic director of Portland Rep. More recently, Bigelow helmed Triangle Productions' wild Drammy-winning *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and planned to direct *Take Me Out* for Artists Repertory Theatre as well as *The Rocky Horror Show*, featuring queer celeb Wade McCollum in an encore production from Triangle.

For after 15 years, Portland's gay stage is over, or at least its regular subscription season is. Critical voices from both gay and play circles say **Triangle Productions** won't be missed. But no matter how many eyebrows were raised by lowbrow productions, founder/producer/director Don Horn deserves credit for two important contributions:

First, Triangle was always a place where any letter of the sexual minority alphabet could feel welcome. Second, he gave numerous local artists opportunities they just wouldn't otherwise have had. So, forgive and forget this season's two tritely gay offerings of *Pageant* and *Sordid Lives*; instead, honor the memory of *Falsettos*, *Bent* and *Jeffrey*, all of which enjoyed popular and critical acclaim.

Which didn't always come easy from *Willamette Week* gay theater reviewer **Steffen Silvis**, a man we loved to hate so long as his barbed wit wasn't pricking us. Thin-skinned critics-of-critics sometimes characterized his insights as less than constructive, but his unwavering demand for excellence cannot be questioned. Now, after seven years of fingering his thesaurus for new ways to congratulate or condemn, changes at *WW* have prompted Silvis to move on and shower his pith on his award-winning playwriting career—in another city. When asked what he'll remember about us, he said, "Only in Portland do straight male actors playing gay characters feel compelled to lard their program bios with loving thanks to

their wives, girlfriends and children, just in case we should think that they really are 'that way.'"

Silvis' departure may be welcome news for **Profile Theatre Project**, which endured the writer's recent claims that Terrence McNally's *It's Only a Play* should be rechristened *It's Only a Wretched Play*. Be that as it may, Profile carves an unequaled niche, digging deeper into the theatrical psyche by spending an entire season focusing on multiple works by a particular playwright. McNally was this year's choice, and whether you love his work or, like Silvis, find it "funny as cancer," the multiple Tony winner



Neal Starbird brought Spain's most celebrated poet back to life in *Lorca* in *A Green Dress*.



Ilana Hamilton played a lesbian college student who knits and studies backstage in between lap dances in *Pure Gold Baby*.

manages to tell universal stories, usually with characters that happen to be gay. You gotta give McNally props for his gay modern-day Jesus in Profile's staged reading of *Corpus Christi*. And it was hard to resist the bravado of Tracy Hinkson's virtuoso deliverance of a bi orchestra leader's X-rated mind-wanderings in *The Stendhal Syndrome* (especially knowing he was a last-minute replacement who had to memorize a virtual monologue precisely timed to realistic conducting of an orchestra). And a special shout-out to the whole cast of *The Lisbon Traviata* for bringing out the best in McNally's less-than-perfect exploration of a struggling same-sex relationship. Of course,



From left, Julianna Jaffe, Wade McCollum and Lindsay Lucas took a serendipitous safari across space and time in *On the Verge*.

bringing out studly Spencer Conway buck naked didn't hurt, either.

In fact, **360-degree nudity** popped up in several productions. While it wasn't surprising to see skin in Triangle's *10 Naked Men*, I certainly didn't expect a script that was equally fleshed out. Conversely, more than prejudice was stripped away in ART's sensitive production of the Tony-winning locker room drama *Take Me Out*, in which a professional ballplayer suddenly discloses publicly that he's gay. Oglefest, yes, but every shower scene was integral to the show's (ahem) dramatic arc. The only ones to strike *Out* may have been extreme hets—and those straight guys can rarely think about sex and baseball at the same time, anyway. For them (and my lesbian friends), there was

Sherry Okamura's *Pure Gold Baby*, a play about female strippers that showed all the requisite T & A—not to mention more "see you next Tuesday" in one night than I've ever seen in my life. Yet, the only thing "gratuitous" about it was being able to tuck a buck. *PGB2005* is scheduled for a summer revival, so don't miss it this time, OK?

Speaking of **missed opportunities**, here's one: *Tape*. Former Portland State University students stuck together this pocket production of Stephen Belber's one-act framing a potential case of date rape. The incident wasn't specifically gay, but Brian Adrian-Koch's performance as the accused aggressor seemed so (unintentionally) closeted that it could have added unusual depth to his character. Talk about subtext: Imagine a conflicted teen-ager trying to force himself on his girlfriend because he's in denial of his sexuality.

A few productions found opportunities to deal with **gender roles**. Insight Out's *On the Verge* explored terra incognita by crossing McCollum with a corset—not for laughs but in an attempt to push the boundary-breaking character of this intrepid female voyager. Sowelu took another tack when it presented the one-act *Keep Tightly Closed* in a *Cool Dry Place* with an all-female cast back to back the same night with an all-male cast. Just as interesting was the role-turned-trans of Inez in Imago's remount of an eternal *No Exit*.

Miracle Theatre's *Lorca* in *A Green Dress*, on the other hand, could never have lasted long enough. It was, in a word, ravishing. Gay playwright Nilo Cruz (who also wrote Pulitzer Prize winner *Anna in the Tropics*, presented this season by Portland Center Stage) led us on a surreal journey through the tragic death and passionate life of outspoken gay Spanish poet Federico García Lorca.

From brutal interrogations to exquisite remembrances, director Olga Sanchez assembled artists that truly created a sum greater than its parts, a highly theatrical event that was altogether transfixing. *Lorca* was not only this year's **best queer theater**, but best of everything. **J**

The 26th annual DRAMMY AWARDS will be held 7 p.m. June 13 at Crystal Ballroom, 1332 W. Burnside St., preceded by a social hour and followed by an after-party. Free and open to the public; no reservations necessary. For details visit www.drammy.info.

By day, TIMOTHY KRAUSE is communications coordinator for City Club of Portland; by night, he serves on the Drammy committee, for which he has attended more than 120 performances during the past 12 months.

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