

CULTURE

Wonder boys

Ballroom blitz hits Northeast Portland

BY AARON SCOTT

When asked about the goal of Wonder Ballroom, Howie Bierbaum, one of the three men orchestrating the building's restoration, says: "We wanted to create a space for contemporary performance that would cater to all ages and all gauges. As eclectic as possible."

The decision not to commit to one genre of performance, one style of people or even one venue is little surprise given the three personalities that make up the Wonder team. Chris Monlux, co-founder of the music promotion company Monqui Presents, and Mark Woolley, owner of Mark Woolley Gallery, set out more than a year ago to find a building that could house a performance space, a cafe and a satellite art gallery, which will also be used for performances and readings. They brought on Bierbaum as general manager shortly after being tipped off that a "for sale" sign was soon to be hung on the doors of the Northeast Portland building.

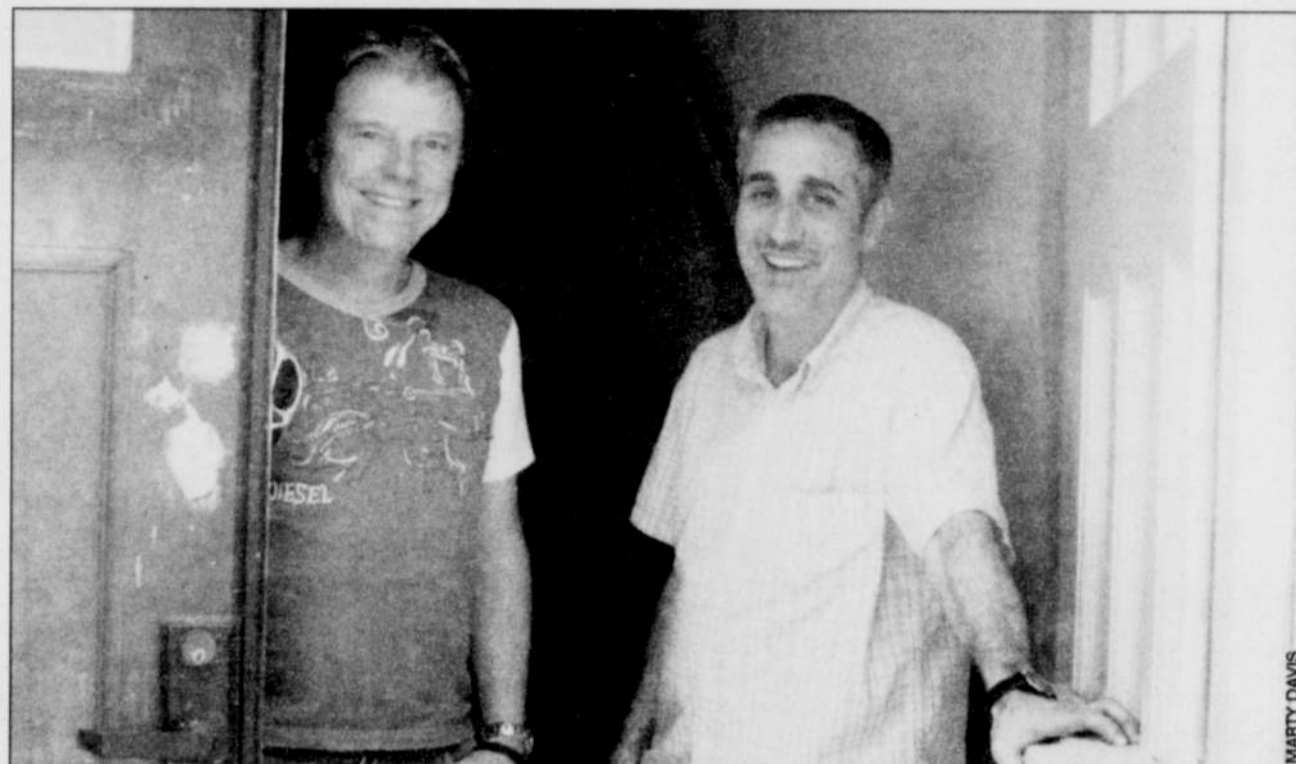
Between the three of them, not only have they influenced virtually every sphere of Portland's artistic landscape, but, at least in the case of Monlux and Bierbaum, they have played significant roles in the city's queer scene.

Monlux started Monqui in 1983 with Mike Quinn and later opened Pine Street Theater, which housed rock shows as well as other performance and literary events. "My roots are in a performance space environment and gay-related things," says Monlux, who brought Beat poets William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg to Pine Street. The venue soon turned into the rock club La Luna, now legendary in its own right.

"When we started Monqui," recalls Monlux, "Willamette Week didn't have a music section. Monqui was the first strip ad. It put Portland on the map for cool events."

Fortunately for Portland's gay and lesbian community, Monlux was not afraid to gear such events toward left-leaning political causes. He brought Nirvana to Portland to play a concert for 1992's No on 9 Campaign, which fought the most vicious of a series of anti-gay ballot measures from the Oregon Citizens Alliance, and he worked with director Gus Van Sant to organize Artists for a Hate Free America, which included celebs such as Michael Stipe and Kurt Cobain.

While Monlux was drawing a heady rush of music and politics to town, Bierbaum started his own promotions company, Howie Bagdadonutz Presents, in 1985. He has since booked many of Portland's most interesting visiting performance artists—gay, straight and otherwise—including Quentin Crisp, *Frasier* actor Dan Butler and Eve Ensler in an early incarnation of *The Vagina Monologues*, and he has played an active role with local performers, directing and producing *House of Cunt* and Amber Martin shows while working as execu-



Mark Woolley (left) and Howie Bierbaum are two-thirds of the team behind Wonder Ballroom.

tive director of Third Angle New Music Ensemble for the past three years.

Monlux and Bierbaum's working relationship began in 1994 when Bierbaum co-organized La Luna's Queer Night, generally remembered by the folks who frequented its chaos as the golden era of PDX queer entertainment.

"Nostalgia for these times and events are why I'm doing the Wonder Ballroom," Monlux admits.

He envisions Wonder as "an organic, neighborhood place that functions for all the arts—dance, theater, acoustic music."

Its calendar offers a delightful diversity rarely seen outside college campuses: *One*, a rock musical written by *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* star Wade McCollum; folk musician Ray LaMontagne; the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls;



The building's gothic facade is being repainted with soft and dark browns.



The renovation will be complete in time for a June 25 fund-raiser for *One*, a rock musical written by *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* star Wade McCollum.

Ancient Order of Hibernians, a group committed to immigration reform, civil rights for people of Irish descent and the preservation of Irish culture. It passed to the Catholic Church and the American Legion Organization before

drag performance artists Kiki and Herb; and Polka-wonder—the 20th annual Portland Polka Party.

That's right. Polka. These are not exactly events guided by the ka-ching of profit. Instead, they reveal that the organizers truly are inspired to create a space to house an eclectic but accessible range of performance and art. Indeed, Wonder is

quickly becoming popular as a venue for non-profit fund-raisers—such as Scrap's Iron Artist competition in July—and it's not even open yet.

The community focus of the project is fitting with the building's history. The hall was built in 1914 by the

Evelyn Collins bought it in 1956 to create a community center and day care that played an integral role in the life of the neighborhood for almost 50 years.

"The building represents strong history for many people in the neighborhood who went here for Collins' day care from the '50s through the '90s," says Bierbaum. "We have a sense of responsibility with the transformation to treat it not only as a historic building, but as part of the neighborhood's history."

They plan to repaint the gothic facade and interior with soft and dark browns, and Bierbaum is ordering large custom-made church chandeliers that will reflect on the original maple floors.

"It's a period renovation, not a lot of flash," says Monlux. "Most of the money has been spent on upgrades, paint and handicap access."

Bierbaum quips: "It's being lovingly restored to its original 1914 period. Like McMensamins...minus the hippie murals."

The Wonder Café, housed in the basement where the day care used to be, will be "comfortable and loungy enough for a bike messenger and art buyer to sit side by side," says Bierbaum. "It will have simple, quality fare in the \$6-\$13 range that uses organic whenever possible. The cocktails will be more classic style, not too designer frou-frou." For décor, expect red detail lines among black surfaces, red and black Naugahyde booths, ebony-stained tables and indirect lighting. The restaurant will open in late July or early August.

What remains to be seen is how the ballroom will change Portland's art scene. "There's nothing north of Lloyd entertainment-wise," says Bierbaum.

But that is quickly changing. Next to Wonder Ballroom, in the building that until recently housed the art space Disjecta, Portland musician Matt Johnson is opening the Secret Society Ballroom and Garageland, which will include a recording studio, store and cafe to operate as a musical community center of sorts. "Russell Street is becoming a mini-Mississippi," says Monlux.

But once they hit it big, Bierbaum and Monlux insist they won't leave their queer roots behind. Bierbaum hints at a brief revival of *Hedwig*, possible Sissyboy performances and certainly Kiki and Herb in December. Monlux promises, "Once a month, expect cutting-edge queer." □

Insight Out Theater Collective and Kaosmosis present THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF ONE, an East-meets-West cabaret featuring Wade McCollum, MarchFourth, AWOL Aerial and the Dahoo Chorus, 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. June 25 at 128 N.E. Russell St. Costumes encouraged. Tickets are \$12-\$20. For more information visit www.wonderballroom.com.

AARON SCOTT thinks life is best lived full of wonder.

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