

THEATER

Gay by play

Queer picks waiting in the wings of Portland's upcoming theater season

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

My friends call me a "theater slut." Maybe it's because I'll spend the night just about anywhere. Give me a good actor with a good story, and I'm a shameless voyeur hoping for a good time. And when those goods are gay, then I'm all the more willing to sit back, relax and enjoy the fantasy. Lucky for me—and you—Portland's 2005-2006 theater season has a number of earnest exhibitionists. Here are a few to keep your eyes on.

Profile Theatre Project

Pulitzer Prize-winning gay scribe Lanford Wilson (a modern-day Chekhov, some say) remains one of America's most frequently produced and widely respected playwrights, and some of his best work gives impassioned voice to the real lives and relationships of gay characters.

"Quite honestly, he's been at the top of my preferred playwright list from year one," remarks Jane Unger, artistic director for Profile Theatre, which spends an entire season examining work by a single author. "Lanford Wilson is one of the most prolific contemporary playwrights and I believe has the distinction of working brilliantly in many different styles."

A staged reading of Tony nominee *Fifth of July* (Nov. 3 to 13) will feature Leif Norby (The Full Monty) in the role of a gay man who lost both legs in Vietnam and wants to sell the family home to escape small-town nosiness, lost hopes and battered dreams, but instead exchanges bitterness for an alternative kind of extended family. In *Burn This* (Jan. 5 to Feb. 12), the death of a young, closeted dancer is the explosive catalyst for a collision that occurs between his once-separate worlds of family and friends. Both stories, Unger says, feature gay characters and gay issues that inform the emotional life of those around them.

And, undoubtedly, audiences.

Miracle Theatre Group

Director Dan Ruiz brings a new through-line to Guillermo Reyes' anthology of gay Latinos titled *Men on the Verge 2 (The Self-Esteem Files)* (Feb. 3 to 25) by contextualizing the solo performance of Andres Alcalá (The Lisbon Traviata) as photographer turned self-portrait artist. Think story-filled standup on steroids.

"Each time the camera flashes, another identity emerges, revealing a new desire, a new fear and a new adventure," explains Ruiz. "By the end, the photographs are combined into one collage piece that unifies every part of man that lives within Alcalá's complex artist. The body of his art represents a much greater whole

than he alone can breathe life." The artist does not live in his body alone, just as the stereotype of gay man cannot stand alone, for he too is made of several, sometimes incredibly funny, parts."

Later in the season, Drammy Award winner Olga Sanchez (*Lorca in a Green Dress*) directs Edwin Sanchez's *Clean* (May 12 to June 3), in which Gustavito—a boy beaten, bullied and abandoned—turns to the church for solace. A young priest recognizes his desperation, and what develops, says Miracle, is a relationship that no one can define and some cannot endure. Around them are members of a Puerto Rican family living in the United States, searching for their own seemingly unattainable acceptance, understanding and love, including a man who sequentially marries three sisters and a drag queen who becomes involved with a married woman.

Uncomfortable? Totally. Irrelevant? Hardly.

Stark Raving Theatre

Have you ever wondered if there's some connection between Stark Raving and Stark Street?

"There have been numerous plays dealing with homosexuality on the Stark Raving Theatre stage. As a gay artistic director, I'm often asked if this is part of some sort of 'agenda,' "



Stark Raving Theatre will continue to explore queer themes, according to artistic director Matthew B. Zrebski.

offers Matthew B. Zrebski. "I find this offensive. I doubt someone would ask a heterosexual artistic director the same question about choosing a heterosexual love story for his or her season."

He says script selection is a lengthy process at this theater, which produces only new works. An average of 400 works annually must pass not only a literary manager but also an eight-person panel before Zrebski joins in to help determine the best grouping for a season.

"We look at structure, courage of choices and the writers' desires to stretch the boundaries of playwriting through style and/or story. That many of these plays have some homosexual content simply means we enjoyed those plays," he remarks, "but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thrilled that queer themes are on our stage."

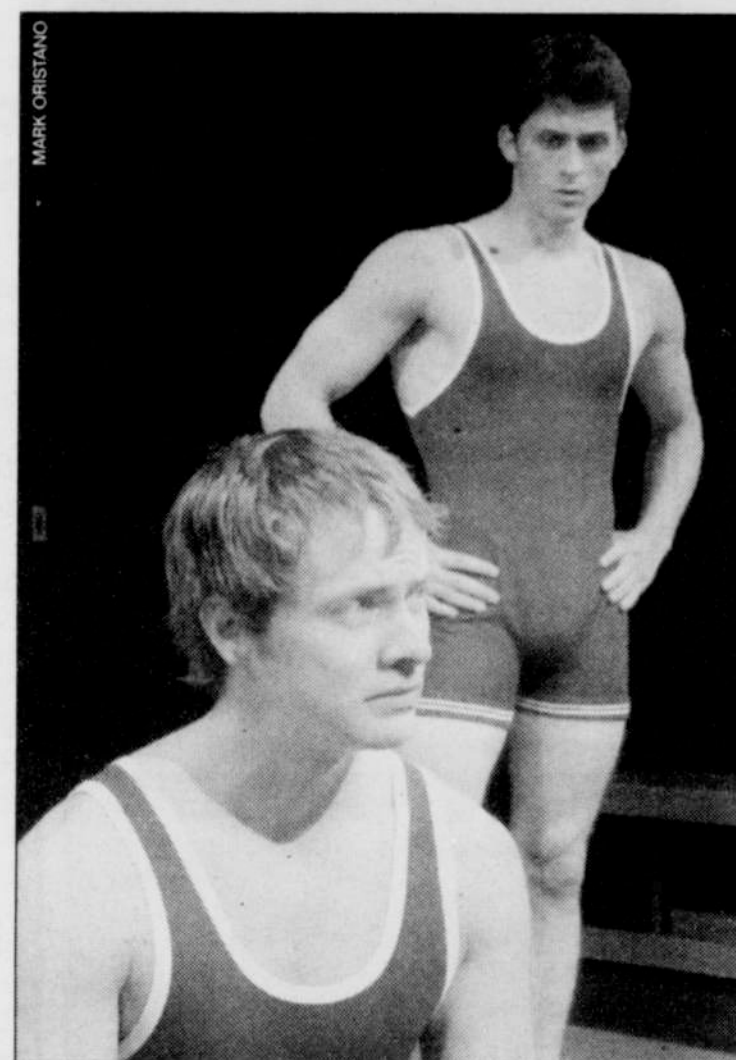
This season is rare, he says, because lesbians are more in the spotlight than gay men.

In March, for example, Zrebski directs Gretchen Icenogle's *The Mark* (March 24 to April 22), a trilogy of acts linked by six characters dealing with mortality, including a woman and her lesbian lover coping with breast cancer. Then in June, Ry Herman's *Vamp* (June 30 to July 29) introduces a frustrated lesbian playwright who sees clichés in her scripts come to life.

And in *Project: Atomic Agape*, Zrebski and resident lesbian playwright Amy Wheeler revisit last season's queer-filled *Kiss It!* through a yearlong development project spanning four readings and culminating with a new play for the following season that Zrebski describes as "a bold and daring two-part epic-comedic-fantasy addressing issues of gender, sexuality and spirituality in the technological 21st century."

Northwest Children's Theater and School

Hidden among a season of *Footloose*, *Peter Pan* and *Seussical*, the Musical is *The Wrestling Season* (March 31 to April 15), an award-winning drama from Laurie Brooks in which eight high school seniors—including best



Chad M. Peterson (left) and Andy Bean star in the Dallas Children's Theater production of *The Wrestling Season*, which will be staged in Portland next spring.

friends Luke and Matt—wrestle literally and figuratively with the destructive power of social stereotypes and peer pressure among young people.

"When Luke reveals to Matt that he is gay, a malicious firestorm of rumor and gossip sweeps the school and threatens to destroy both of them," says artistic director John Monteverde. In addition to sexual politics, the play addresses brutal pressures of high school athletics and hate crimes that result in Matt's near date rape of a girl in order to disprove rumors of homosexuality.

"Heavy stuff but, sadly, not unfamiliar territory for an average American high school student," says Monteverde, pointing out that malicious gossip is cited as a leading cause of teen suicide. "Two of the four main characters in the play are gay teens, and Matt, although probably not gay, still has to deal with issues surrounding his friendship with Luke as well as coming to terms with his own homophobia."

Truly this is the pick of the season; watch for post-play discussion forums in partnership with gay and lesbian teen support groups. □

TIMOTHY KRAUSE has been enchanted by theater ever since he was typecast as an angel in his first-grade Christmas pageant.

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