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theater

Coming Clean About Love

Miracle Theatre's consciousness-raising play is sure to raise a few eyebrows, too
by Timothy Krause

For a play titled *Clean*, the final production in Miracle Theatre Group's season might seem at first a little dirty. Some audience members may cringe; others may be offended. Even the cast senses a little subversion in the unabashed exploration of this gritty but surprisingly romantic tale encircling Gustavito, a Nuyorican boy in the Bronx whose innocent fascination with the Catholic Church evolves into a true love for one of its priests.

From his home in upstate New York, award-winning Puerto Rican playwright Edwin Sanchez says that while the play grew out of an attempt to wrap his head around the underpinnings of NAMBLA, the North American Man/Boy Love Association, *Clean* is ultimately more universal in its examination of love and what people do to get it, hide from it and defend it.

"Why would anyone fall in love with someone who was underage? I really wanted to explore that," says Sanchez. "And then it really became about a boy falling in love with someone older. And being adamant about that love. I was fascinated by that."

But does *Clean* answer any questions about intergenerational relationships?

"No," he confesses. "But I didn't mean to. I really wanted to explore it, debate it and make us all look at it. I've never personally been in that situation, but as a gay man, I grew up hearing my love was wrong. Maybe that's what made me explore it. I really wanted to delve into 'impossible love.'"

And it's not just the uncomfortable bond between a child and a priest that Sanchez examines. The boy's whole dysfunctional family labors with feelings for individuals they never thought they would, or should, care for. Losing wife after wife, lonely patriarch Kiko keeps going back to the same family to marry sister after sister, arguing all along that love is God's way of punishing people. Meanwhile, Kiko's other son, the macho-brutish Junior, can't figure out why the neighbor girl snubs him; after all, he says, once you love someone, they belong to you. And even as she fends off Kiko's advances with a hammer, Gustavito's aunt-turned-stepmother Mercy takes a shine to Norry, a drag queen who has hired her to sew a dress.

"These are all people who are having such problems admitting to themselves who they love, and admitting it to the person they love. It is Gustavito—the youngest, who has not yet been censored by life—who freely admits who he loves and is punished for it," Sanchez explains. "Now, quite honestly, if I had a 15-year-old son who told me he was in love with an adult male—as gay as I am, and as open-minded as I hope I am—I would probably freak. Yet, how would I know it wasn't real love? If this play is about anything, it's about not judging love. And that's a scary thing to do."

Playing the role of the young Gustavito is actor Kurt Conroyd, 22, a recent graduate of Willamette University who has already appeared on several Portland stages. "The first time I read the play, its subtle beauty almost made me cry—Gustavito's innocence, his pure willingness to believe in something and to follow it through and

not get caught up in anything else," he says.

Taking on the role of a boy who ages from 7 to 15 in the course of the evening is no child's play for this gay actor, whose character is too young to see the outward complications of his inner feelings. "It's so easy in a child's mind: I love you; you like me; what's the problem? The social implications only happen when you grow up," says Conroyd.

The priest, he notes, offers Gustavito solace from a discouraging family life along with a father figure he can trust without fear of abandonment or abuse. In exchange, the religious leader (played by multiple award-winning gay actor Andrés Alcalá) envies the boy's immense spirituality, something he personally has lost touch with. As Gustavito's affection matures, the priest struggles to suppress any reciprocal feelings.

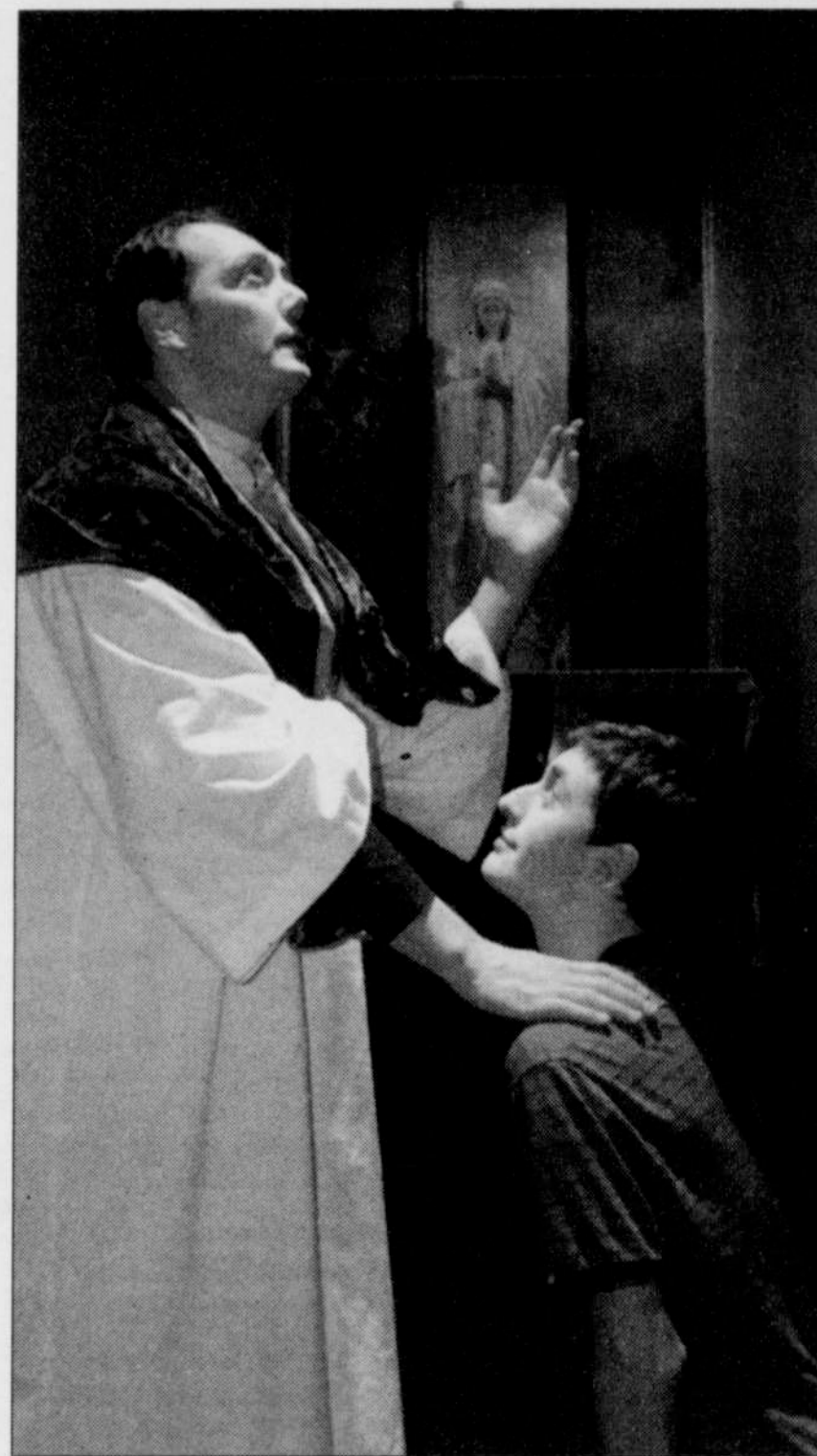
"Edwin Sanchez has created some very challenging relationships in the play. Things are so tough, there are conversations with God," remarks director Olga Sanchez, who last season won a Drammy Award for her vision of *Lorca in a Green Dress*. As one of Miracle's artistic directors, she chose this difficult script because of the truth it speaks about the experience of loving, of being in a relationship and of commitment to God, to another human being and, in the end, to oneself.

Sanchez the playwright says *Clean* isn't a sacrilegious manifesto endorsing child-adult love. Rather, he sees his play as a wake-up call that love is not black-and-white but filled with shades of gray. "What I hope we all see in it is that love is rare and worth fighting for. And that we shouldn't have to change for love. If someone loves us, they must love us as-is, just as we should love ourselves."

For example, the more that Norry (played by gay actor Vicente Guzman-Orozco) becomes better acquainted with Mercy, the more the drag queen finds herself helplessly attracted to the woman. Norry is clearly intimidated by the thought of stepping into a straight relationship, but she is ultimately willing to embrace the role-change for the sake of a love she can neither explain nor control.

"I love how Norry tries to change for Mercy, but Mercy makes it very clear that, no, she fell in love with a peacock, and that's who she wants. Not Norry's attempt at changing to suit society. Norry is a drag queen, and that's who she fell in love with. No explanation needed," says the author.

Sanchez the director is also fascinated by the relationship between this gay transvestite and virginal woman, who deep down might even be lesbian. "I don't know if they ever consummate



A 15-year-old boy (Kurt Conroyd) falls in love with a Catholic priest (Andrés Alcalá) in *Clean*.

their relationship sexually, but they recognize and commit to a deep friendship that is stronger than their sexuality," she says.

The lesson, perhaps, is that labeling love is to limit love.

"Sometimes people get caught up too much in their sexuality to prove something instead of allowing something else to happen or be open to the experience. I think Gustavito is so open because he doesn't classify something as gay," argues Conroyd.

Which leads the actor to voice some of the questions that *Clean* will leave its audiences to consider: "What is love? What is real love? What is infatuation? What is obsession? Is there something wrong with the kid? Or is it real? And who's to say what is love, or love is this, or love is a man and a woman married?" 10

Miracle Theatre Group presents *CLEAN* 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays from May 12 to June 3 at 525 S.E. Stark St. Tickets are \$16-\$20 from 503-236-7253. For more information visit www.milagro.org.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE serves on the board of the Portland Area Theatre Alliance, is a member of the Drammy Award committee and works as communications coordinator for City Club of Portland.

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