

theater

Listening to Our Inside Voice

In Artists Rep's *Theater District*, what's left unsaid is what needs to be heard

by Timothy Krause

In always au courant New York City, 15-year-old Wesley has recently moved in with his gay dad, high-power attorney Kenny, and Kenny's partner, actor-turned-restaurateur George. Though Wesley is hoping to strengthen ties with his father, neither knows exactly how to connect with the other, often relying on George as the intercessor. But when Wesley and queer buddy Theo become victims of gay-bashing, it's Wesley's mother, Lola, who intercedes, startling even herself when sounding doubts about the dynamics of this modern-day family.

Substitute Oregon for Manhattan, and the gently prodding story of *Theater District*, opening May 23 at Artists Repertory Theatre, could be a metaphor for Portland.

"This play deals with gay parenting, gay-bashing and more important than all of those, it deals with that kind of radical chic, that kind of 'how liberal are we anyway when we say we're very liberal?'" says director Jon Kretzu (*Assassins*), who is gay. "When it gets right down to your flesh and blood being involved, how do you really feel?"

Theater District, he says, navigates the choppy waters of the human spirit at a time when polite, political correctness, even among family, pre-empts honest and healthy confrontation of fears, assumptions and buried prejudices.

"I love that the play does it with such subtlety," Kretzu adds. "There's a gracefulness to the writing—and wit—and also a healthy amount of ambiguity. All the questions have been asked, and things have been thrown into the sunlight, but none of it has been resolved."

Questions from Wesley (Morgan Lee) as seemingly simple as "Is homosexuality a choice?" and "When did you first know you were gay?" and questions that dance, sometimes hypocritically, around the delicate culpability of parenthood, culminate at a dinner with Wesley's extended family debating what's in the boy's best interest. It's in this search for meaning where cracks develop in the fashionable façade of Lola (Susannah Mars).

And that's a tipping point, says Kretzu, a "horribly, difficult and embarrassing moment in the play where questions are asked that you understand exactly why they're asked, and yet they call to mind such matters of trust and human dignity."

Credit the script's sensitivity and style to veteran television writer and first-time playwright Richard Kramer, the acclaimed author, director and producer of *thirtysomething*, *Tales of the City* and *My So-Called Life*. He reclaimed the unproduced script, originally conceived in 2000 for HBO under the title *Ellen DeGeneres Never Remembers Me*, casting aside TV's iron-maiden format for the freedom of live theater.

"When I started to write the script, I realized I was dying to go let things take their own time and find their own pace and filled with the breath of life," says Kramer, who is gay.

Another advantage of writing for the stage was watching his work evolve through various incarnations. The story originally concerned George, a character based on a real-life Los Angeles restaurant worker whom Kramer had known for 10 years.

"He was one of the invisible pleasant people, and I was ashamed that I didn't know what his name was. Who is this person when he's not serving me?" Kramer imagined. "That's what it was originally about: to cause you to look at who the people in your life are that you so utterly take for granted, to look at other people's mysteries."

Today, Kramer has come to appreciate another layer, one focused on the flawed relationship between Kenny (Patrick Disney) and George (gay actor Michael Mendelson) and the bravery in Kenny's risk-all truth-telling about his genuine feelings as both a gay partner and, more importantly, a parent.

"These are people who are really invested in seeming like nothing is a problem for them and that they accept everything. But they don't. They're just like everybody else," comments the playwright. "It's the hardest thing in the world to really know what



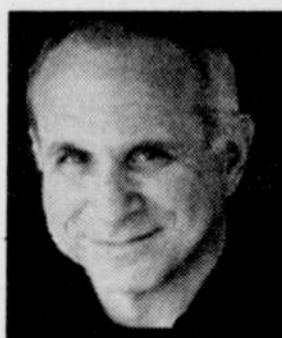
When a kid has two sets of parents, who gets the final say? From left, Michael Mendelson, Morgan Lee, Patrick Disney and Susannah Mars explore modern-day family dynamics in *Theater District*.

you feel. We all think we really know what we feel because it's convenient for us to keep our lives going."

But it's not until push comes to shove that everyday people share their innermost feelings. In fact, if it weren't for the incident of gay-bashing, these characters would have gone on as they were instead of coming face to face with themselves, chief among them Kenny, who came out later in life and still isn't completely comfortable in his own skin.

"Kenny is a very common person," Kretzu says, "and I don't think he is in any way a hateful person. He has many of the neuroses, traumas and feelings of a great many gay men. For all the amounts of gay liberation and change, there's still a great deal of stigma, self-imposed homophobia and self-hate that isn't talked about much anymore. We all think we're beyond it, but it's still very much there."

As a father, Kenny wrestles with more than being gay. This Type A man, overcompensating for his internal strife by spending an extraordinary amount of time volunteering for gay charities, is rather ambivalent toward his son, unable to find a niche for Wesley in his driven, powerful life. He would almost prefer Wesley weren't there, especially when peppered with personal questions he has yet to answer for himself and suspicions about Wesley's own sexuality. In this, the duty defaults to George to be the only parent present in Wesley's life, the person who is always there for him.



Richard Kramer

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