

theater

Keeping It Real

For theater artist John Ellingson, coming out was an important step in connecting with the integrity of his craft

by Timothy Krause

Give John Ellingson something fierce to wear. Add some jewelry. Paint his nails. And don't forget his trademark black eyeliner. After growing up closeted in suburban safety, this talented young theater practitioner is ready to be noticed.

At 21, Ellingson is quickly becoming a familiar sight at Northwest Children's Theater, seen last as the mischievous Cat in the Hat in *Seussical, the Musical*. He's also a skilled visual artist, painting scenery for Theatre Vertigo and other companies. And this summer he returns to NWCT in the lead role of *Moby Dick: The Musical*.

For Ellingson, growing up in Beaverton was comfortable and secure. Stable home. Steady girlfriend. Loving family with parents who didn't bat an eye at his interest in performing as a clown, singing in school musicals or apprenticing as a scenic artist. He was also convinced he was straight.

"Then I found out one day that everyone [at school] thought I was gay, which was very traumatic because, for me, that was an evil, sinful, I'm-going-to-hell thing," he says. "I thought that if someone thought that of me, I was doing something bad."

Raised in a church-centric family by pastor parents, Ellingson shoved aside questions about his

sexuality and, upon graduation in 2003, headed to University of Victoria to study drama. This was his chance for a new start where he could leave the issue behind and focus on school. That is, until the following year when he returned from Christmas break to find that—for the first time since junior high—he hadn't been cast in a show, leaving him with time on his hands to do little but think.

"I knew I was really trying to hold something down," he recalls, "and when I wasn't busy, I could think about it more. I was scared. It was painful and awful."

Though not cast in a production, Ellingson did partake in a play reading as, ironically, a gay man secure in his sexuality opposite another man less sure. "The play was about two guys asking questions," he notes. "It wasn't about whether he was or not, but why can't he ask, why he's so scared to ask."

That seemed familiar territory to Ellingson. At the same time, a friendship with an openly gay student helped him understand how much more there can be to queer culture besides sex. After that, it wasn't long before friends were throwing him a coming-out party. He began to understand himself better than ever before, and he drew stronger connections to his life's ambitions.

But halfway through his dream academic pro-

gram, everything changed when Ellingson, home for the summer, decided to tell his parents.

"I love my parents, and it was funny to me that I felt I had to be deceitful and lie about something that I felt good about. That didn't make sense to me," he says. "It was rough when I left. I finally heard and felt what they feel about it."

In short, his parents didn't approve. When they withdrew their support, Ellingson left college and returned to Portland, where he now performs, paints and teaches children's theater classes.

"Through it all, the peace you get from all that is knowing who you are. I still have a lot to learn, but the core is there," he concludes. "When I go to bed at night, I'm happy. When I wake up, I'm excited. There are bad days and stressful things, but right before I came out, I wanted to be alone—which is not something that is me. I didn't want to work, and I felt lost. And I think at the end of the day, if you're happy at what you're doing, it's a good thing."

Though sometimes painful, the process has kept him honest in his craft, too.

"You just can't bullshit in theater. If there's conflict in yourself, it reads onstage," he says. "Theater is a mask, but it should be a mask that we choose to put on—not one that you put on because you don't



ANNALISE MOYER

John Ellingson stars in *Moby Dick: The Musical* as the headmistress of a bankrupt all-girls academy that stages its own version of the Herman Melville epic to raise money to keep the school afloat.

want to show something of yourself. You don't hide behind it; you wear it proudly." **jo**

Northwest Children's Theater presents *MOBY DICK: THE MUSICAL* July 14 to Aug. 6 at Artists Repertory Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St. Tickets are \$16-\$20 from www.nwcts.org.

When not applauding local theater, TIMOTHY KRAUSE is communications coordinator for City Club of Portland.

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