

theater

Our Erudite Playwright

William S. Gregory returns to the stage to banter about our family circle, circa 1947

by Timothy Krause

Well known for his elegant and witty repartee, Portland playwright William S. Gregory has seen several of his scripts reach the stage, including the thrice-crowned Drammy-winning *Mary Tudor* at CoHo Productions a few years back. This month he returns to the spotlight for the premiere of *Chateau Joyeux*, a romantic comedy set in 1947 France that pits a chic Parisian widow against her domineering country cousin in a battle over the family estate.

Timothy Krause: *Chateau Joyeux* includes a lesbian storyline. Tell us more.

William S. Gregory: The play follows the comic adventures/machinations of a woman returning to her family home after 30 years in Paris. Exhausted by the horror of the war just past, the protagonist tries to heal the long-standing personal rifts in her family between herself and her two cousins who remained on the vineyard.... A major theme in the play is redemption and forgiveness—often from unexpected sources—and the comic ways life moves beyond our narrow views.

The bubbling of the plot, including confusions, deceptions and unexpected romances, causes the younger of the vineyard cousins to come out to her older sister—the head of the family—in a strong yet tender declaration of her lesbianism, claiming her right to bring her lover into the family circle.

TK: What was your inspiration?

WSG: I was inspired in writing this play to pay tribute to my great aunt Sybil [who died in 2004]. Besides being the first GLBT person I ever knew—I can almost say I knew she was a lesbian before I knew I was gay...it was just an accepted part of our family—I always admired her quiet strength and dignity. No matter the situation, if there was a conflict or an argument, when the storm had passed and everybody settled down, somehow Aunt Sybil always ended up doing just what she planned and said she'd do. This impressed me. She lived her truth in deeds rather than arguing over words. She didn't wait for others to hand her equality as a woman or a lesbian; she lived her life as she was, and it was up to the rest of the world to catch up—if it could. In some ways it has—and in some, sadly, it still hasn't.

In setting *Chateau Joyeux* in 1947, I wanted to make a point about the depth and richness of GLBT history. Too often GLBT culture is spoken of as though it sprang fully formed from the Stonewall riots. While the achievements of that generation are important, it is also important to remember that the slogan "We Are Everywhere" applies to history as well as geography. While

general views on sexual identity have changed over time, there have always been men and women who found their chief erotic and creative inspirations in members of their own sex. We have always been here, and a play like *Chateau Joyeux* shows this in a gentle yet compelling way.



William S. Gregory

TK: How does your own sexuality influence your writing?

WSG: I'm wildly narcissistic, using aspects of my personality and my experience in the creation and animation of my characters.... I don't know whether being a gay man makes it easier to identify with characters beyond my personal, physical experience—but if it does, I'm grateful for it.

TK: Some local theater practitioners are adamant about keeping the words "gay" and "artist" as far apart as possible, but this is not an issue for you. Why?

WSG: I have little trouble intermingling these descriptors, because in the case of "gay playwright," it's easy. It's easy, because there are so many around. Paul Rudnick said something like, "I'm a gay playwright; we practically have our own census box!" It takes little courage to follow a trail blazed by Christopher Marlowe, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Joe Orton, Edward Albee and Douglas Carter Bean. That's not really a trail—it's a superhighway!

"Gay actor" and "gay director"—those are much less well-trodden paths, and I admire those men and women who are willing to step out on them. Truth and clarity of life may be difficult, but they have their rewards. **to**

CoHo PRODUCTIONS presents *Chateau Joyeux*
Jan. 19 to Feb. 24 at 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. Tickets
are \$20-\$23 from 503-220-2646. For details visit
www.cohoproductions.com.



A chic Parisian widow battles with her domineering country cousin over the family estate in *Chateau Joyeux*.

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* syphilis 101: it can cause painless sores or a skin rash • it can have no signs • it can be cured

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