

theater

The Boys in Their Outfits

Gay playwright puts big ideas behind small-town men who play dress-up

by Timothy Krause

Shortly after moving to Minneapolis in 2003, Jordan Harrison was commissioned by Commonweal Theatre Company in Lanesboro, Minn. They asked him to write a play that spoke directly to their tiny town and its history. When a friend tipped him off that Lanesboro's little storefront museum held some fascinating photographs of a 1927 cross-dressing pageant, the playwright marched in and asked the docent where he might find the drag photos.

A Playwright's Work at Various Stages

Though Jordan Harrison plans to be in Portland for initial rehearsals and opening night of *Act a Lady* at Portland Center Stage, the Bainbridge Island, Wash., native who now lives in San Diego is busy working on a musical adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*. "It's the first musical I've ever written, and it's been a pleasure to discover that all those hours of watching *The Music Man* and *South Pacific* weren't wasted! I think it helped give me a sixth sense about what is best sung rather than spoken."



Jordan Harrison

He's also researching a play commissioned for South Coast Rep in Costa Mesa, Calif., about the history of typography and the role of typefaces in different revolutions. "How something as seemingly tiny as a font affects the way we think, the way we live our lives."

But that's not all: In addition to serving as one of two editors of the annual publication *Play: A Journal of Plays*, Harrison is finishing work on *Doris to Darlene*, a play about the relationship between 1960s girl-group pop and Wagnerian opera. "There's more of a connection than you might think. So, of course, I'll be first in line to see the *Dreamgirls* movie." 10

Harrison says the woman looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign language and then said, "Oh, you mean the boys in their outfits."

His subsequent scenario of men who cast themselves in a period melodrama dressed in "fancy-type, women-type" costumes first caught the attention of Portland audiences at the 2005 Just Add Water/West Playwrights Festival. The new farce then was selected to open the highly regarded 2006 Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Ky. And now, some 80 years after the museum's photos were taken, the men of Lanesboro once more step into skirts when Harrison's *Act a Lady* opens in Portland.

Contending that people are much more than the sum of their backgrounds, *Act a Lady* promises to speak to the woman in every man, the man in every woman and the magic of the theater to uncover both. Reluctant to disclose too much of the story, however, Harrison simply points to one example late in the first act when the strapping leading man is romancing a sparkly makeup girl. "He's about to make his move to kiss her when he realizes he's still wearing his gown from rehearsal. And you can see that the makeup girl is fascinated by—and attracted to—the femininity that she's bringing out of him. And he's both excited and freaked out that it was waiting inside him all along."

The inspirational event captured in those museum pictures was called a Womanless Wedding, and Harrison learned that they weren't uncommon occasions in the Midwest and South during the first half of the 20th century. Producers would go from town to town, recruiting prominent men—from mayors to firefighters to teachers—to put on a grand show. And what immediately struck him about the photos was that those essentially Prohibition-era Midwest farmers had put so much care into their drag.

"They didn't look ridiculous—someone had taught them how to do their makeup, how to pose elegantly, how to find their light," notes Harrison, 29. "I wondered: Who was that person? And of course I wondered what it would be like to be queer in a small town in the '20s and to suddenly find yourself in a dress—and be celebrated for it. And eventually I wondered: What was the conversation



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Gender lines blur, identities explode and alter egos assert themselves in *Act a Lady*.

these men would have had with the female characters they were playing?"

Which elevates *Act a Lady* to more than just another half-pint historical pageant.

"It feels more like a fable—the characters definitely have a rural 1927 innocence about sexuality and gender roles. I think that's probably one of the reasons these cross-dressing performances could have happened: The actors who performed them didn't think they were doing anything gate-crashing or subversive. It was just for fun," says Harrison. "It was just, ostensibly, 'the boys in their outfits.'"

Modern audiences, however, will be quick to recognize what these characters might not even know about themselves, including that at least one is gay.

"When one of the characters says, 'You're the realest man I know' to one of his fellow actors, the audience laughs because they know this is as close as he can get to saying, 'I love you,'" Harrison explains. "The men in *Act a Lady* are playing women that always have the perfect word available, but in their own lives, they haven't found the right words yet. So their clothes aren't the only part of their drag get-up—it's their language, too."

Researching the play, Harrison learned that directors of Womanless Weddings were often female, and it was important to him that the female characters in this play got to cross-dress, too, even though the 1927 pageant kept them on the sidelines. "As one of the characters in the play mentions, a woman dressed as a man is a different experience altogether. Dietrich in a tux is a sexual threat, Jack Lemmon in a dress is not."

And then there's the God-fearing, accordion-

playing Dorothy, the sort of music teacher who would rap a student on the knuckles with a ruler. Even though she's fearsome to other characters in the play, Harrison says she is probably the one closest to the audience. She is recruited, against her better judgment, to play accompaniment for the play-within-the-play. As an aside, Harrison divulges, "The actress playing Dorothy at PCS has no prior accordion experience, but I hear she is bravely flinging herself into the unknown."

Which itself illuminates the sense of hidden adventure that lurks in lonesome places like Lanesboro, ultimately surfacing among characters like Dorothy, whose newfound definition of art is the sensation that *I went somewhere, and I'm not totally sure I ever came back.*

"This play is about people who are venturing into unknown territory, losing track of themselves—or who they thought they were," affirms Harrison. "This play is, on some level, about a group of people who are making art but would never call themselves artists. I think they would consider it too fancy, immodest even. I think uncertainty—and mystery—are undervalued experiences in theater right now." 10

PORTLAND CENTER STAGE presents *Act a Lady* Jan. 30 to March 11 in Gerding Theater Studio at the Armory, 128 N.W. 11th Ave. Tickets are \$15-\$30 from 503-445-3700 or www.pcs.org.

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