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**Cheek to Cheek**

Backstage bawdiness

**R**ecently I found myself naked in a roomful of hot young men. No, I wasn't at Club Portland, which will close before I ever visit. Instead I was backstage at Portland Opera's *Norma*.

*Norma* is my fifth production as a supernumerary, an extra, commonly referred to as a spear carrier whether you carry a spear or not. In this show, 13 of us processed onstage, clad only in fur-covered jockstraps, and prepared for battle by smearing war paint on each other's bodies in a homoerotically suggestive way.

The fun of being a supernumerary is hearing glorious music up close while being watched by thousands. It requires a certain exhibitionism, and this show in particular required a narcissism that showed up in lots of preening backstage. There was also a lot of bawdiness. Like the rehearsal when I reached behind **Spencer Warden** to paint his back and instead gave him a wedgie in full view of the chorus. Or when **Travis Hollingsworth** painted a smiley face on his war buddy's chest.

As I started compiling material for this column, I realized that so much of the kidding around was sexual in nature, like the time **Marc Kochanski** put his spear into the opening in the stage where mine belonged and I accused him of putting his pole in my hole. Indeed, the last time I wrote about Portland Opera, my column was one smutty joke after another.

So, I started thinking about why there was so much sexual bantering going on among the supernumeraries (gay and straight) and called a number of actor friends to quiz them about their experiences backstage.

"Just hearing you ask about this made me blush," said **Michael Mendelson**. "I've never been so in touch with my feminine side as during *The Heidi Chronicles*. Three guys and five women all in one dressing room. There was much talk of genitalia. The young straight guy was in heaven. I don't think he'd been in a room with that many women in their underwear—and good underwear. Because when you're that close you really need to dress up for the occasion."

**Kelsey Tyler** told me: "When I did *Romeo and Juliet* at Triangle [Productions] with two other Catholic prep school boys [**Scott Weimer** and **Tony James**], you had three gay men in their early 30s and we were just raunchy and sexual backstage. There was no holds barred talking about sex."

Actress **Torrey Cornwell** confessed: "We're adults, and half the time we're not getting any because we're in rehearsal all the time. So you have to throw some fun in, some flirting, some innuendoes."

But the sexual shenanigans aren't limited to gay people. Mendelson told me that during a show at Profile Theatre, a straight actor "would come in with



**Out Going**  
BY FLOYD SKLAVER

all these different G-strings and show off to people each night." And musical director **Rick Lewis**, who began his career in New York, told me, "It was always the straight guys coming out of the shower and slapping the gay guys on the butt with a towel."

So why is the sexual energy so high backstage? Portland Center Stage artistic director **Chris Coleman** says, "I think human beings are sexual



**Spencer Warden and Floyd ready themselves for battle.**

creatures, and in a creative situation like the theater, you're asked to bring the full range of your emotions—your sadness, your anger, your delight and your eroticism—into the room. That's part of your skill set."

Lewis says, "The titillation is always there and it's always going to happen because you're in the theater for affirmation, and the easiest and most immediate form of that satisfaction is sexual." Mendelson adds: "What we do as actors is eliminate the lies. When you take away the lies, the walls and facades begin to break down. So you're less inhibited. You bond in ways that some actors don't even bond with their partners."

Still, not everyone agrees that the theater is a hotbed of whoredom. While Lewis acknowledges that most of his most memorable experiences occurred in New York, in Portland "there's relatively little of that going on—it's Hooterville and Pixley here," he jokes, referring to the cities in *Petticoat Junction*.

That certainly wasn't my experience with *Norma*, so the question remains: Is it the sexually charged atmosphere? Or is that just what happens when you're Out Going? **jo**

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