

theater

Plays for Gays

Will the Drammys find something queer to honor at this year's ceremony?

by Timothy Krause

Will anything queer top the bill at the 2007 Drammy Awards? Hard to say, but one thing is clear: Portland's gay theater scene has seen a stage of transition during the past year.

After a long history with many incarnations, there were no more raves for Stark Raving Theatre—a queer-friendly venue that turned up toes for good last summer during the run of *Vamp*. Triangle Productions, on the other hand, continued genre reassignment out of the milieu of camp, drag and skin (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Pageant* and nearly every show before 2006) to the straight-cut, apple-pie Plaids, warm-and-fuzzy dogs that sing and a nun-too-funny Christmas catechism in a church. What's next? *How the Soccer Mom Solved the Mystery of the Mall?*

One hopeful sign was the introduction of Key Productions and *Can't Say I Do*, a politically charged musical about same-sex marriage from Rose City rookies. Though the production was ultimately tepid, it was hot to have spunky new kids on the block to fill Triangle's gay-lovin' hole.

An increasing number of plays dragged up gender issues. Jakers Productions snuck through the Back Door in *Silence*, tiptoeing through an otherwise royal monster of boy-discovers-he's-a-girl road trip. Friends of Liberace shackled up with *Daughters of Mary Kay* when club kids Sissyboy stripped *The Maids* of recognition. Northwest Children's Theater gave a whale of a surprise when dear queer John Ellingson played a frocked-up Headmistress panting for Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick: The Musical*, only to be topped by understudy Travis Brown's last-minute scene-sealing stand-in as wife Esta.

And revivals of *Hedwig* might well be considered the gays' golden *Nutcracker*, even if oft-ovated Wade McCollum continues to chase other roles in skirts, as when he predictably, though ably, manned *I Am My Own Wife* at Portland Center Stage in that same cozy new subterranean studio that

later introduced us to the feminine predications of *Act a Lady*—arguably the most adorable, charming and utterly delightful gender-benders of the season.

Playing in tandem with *Act a Lady* was a little late-night nod called *The Thugs*, which included a giddy gaybee peeped among a corps of cubicle characters. No big deal, right? Well, not until *The Portland Mercury* decided to stand up for queers everywhere and call out actor Kelsey Tyler's interpretation as offensively flamboyant. PCS' self-proclaimed homo (and, incidentally, artistic director) Chris Coleman then stepped in to defend Tyler's pink fanny pack, arguing that (duh) diversity must be inclusive of stereotypes. Merc reviewer Alison Hallett responded: "The mere fact that a character is gay should not in and of itself be funny."

Which nixes my one-and-only chance at a career in comedy, but leads me to my point: Looking back at the season's 100-plus productions, I sense a change in the role we queers play. Remember how in the big arts canon of life we've shifted from invisible inspiration to subtle subtext, leaping from once-reviled odious pervert to witty and clever sidekick? Then, more recently, LGBTQ clicked as the entertainment industry's stock market ticker symbol, and we were center stage. Not yet as individuals, but as a people—our "lifestyle."

Well, the current awards season began with at least one holdover from that genre, namely Artists Repertory Theatre's *Theater District*, a sensitive family drama about a conflict that, true enough, I only wish we've grown beyond. But it wasn't long before we saw stories where queer characters lived sorta like we live here in Portland. You might argue "assimilated"; I prefer "integrated," where we are on even footing with other characters and where our perspectives are valued to advance the story, gay-focused or not. Semantics? Perhaps. But it's not how a story affects being gay, but rather how being gay affects the story.

Think of local gay dramatist William S. Gregory's *Chateau Joyeux*, in which a lesbian relationship was part-and-parcel to other issues at hand. Recall how bisexuality complicated relationships in Profile Theatre's honorable production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*. Or take note of Hand2Mouth Theatre's wild and raucous *Repeat After Me* spectacle, which seamlessly incorporated several same-sex encounters. And in *One Day*, the high-minded Sojourn Theatre—known for civic engagement storytelling—shared not one but two queer days in the life of P-town. As a whole, these were opportunities to experience our lives beyond the "oh my God you're gay" drama (PCS' unfortunate *Bad Dates* notwithstanding).

Perhaps the most charged post-play discussions this season followed *Many Hats' Mut*, a controversial new work by local queer dramatist Lava Alapai that dropped jaws with its semi-autobiographical response to race rules faced by an African-American lesbian who didn't know she was black until college. The play wasn't about the character's sexuality, but sexuality was inseparable from her story.

So while it's kinda funny that we've come to a point of arguing about who is permitted to be



Bisexuality complicated relationships in Profile Theatre's honorable production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*.

offended and who defines what's progressive, what's diverse or what's even a stereotype, for that matter...it's also cool that live, local theater is playing the role of not only entertainer but provocateur. I mean, seriously: When was the last time a Kellerized bus-and-truck production tapped your head as well as your wallet?

But even as we celebrate the creativity of Portland theaters, the most exciting queer moments probably won't even be mentioned at this year's ceremony. *The Fall of the House*—a crazy four-week experiment in live, late-night serialized soap opera kicked up by those glam gams of The Bluestockings—didn't have enough performances to qualify for consideration. Who knew there'd be an audience for four performances, far less the necessary eight? Yet this very funny and hip theater of the ad-lib built a young and enthusiastic following that came back each week to see spontaneous candor improv'd around loosely scripted scenarios, including lesbian and bi storylines that were honestly quite touching. The good news? Season two is already in the works. 10

The 28th annual DRAMMY AWARDS ceremony, hosted by award-winning gay director and actor Andrés Alcalá, will be held June 11 at Crystal Ballroom, 1332 W. Burnside St. Doors open at 6 p.m., and the ceremony begins at 7, followed by an after-party presented by Portland Area Theatre Alliance. Admission is free. For details visit www.drammy.info.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE is marketing director for Miracle Theatre Group and concluding his third year on the Drammy committee.



Queer dramatist Lava Alapai dropped jaws starring in *Mutt*, her semi-autobiographical play about an African-American college student who discovers she's black.

justout wants to hear from you!

Visit us at the Pride Waterfront Festival, Booth E-1 and participate in our 2007 Readers Survey.

Tell us what you read, what you like, and yes, equally important, what you don't like.

We'll see you at Pride!

