

theater

Two Sides of the Same Coin

From rent boys to school boys, queer peers dabble in the currency of affection

by Timothy Krause

One centers on a handsome Hollywood homo trapped in the closet to protect his career. The other features English lads willing to suck it up just for good grades. Together, two plays—Douglas Carter Beane's *The Little Dog Laughed* at Portland Center Stage and Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* at Artists Repertory Theatre—curiously reflect how and where one finds reward and fulfillment. And the projects' directors—both gay, as are both playwrights—are not without their own ideas.

In *The History Boys*, for example, a charismatic teacher is not only challenged by a successor with new philosophies, but then is quietly asked to retire after inappropriately touching some of his students. The reaction of the administration and the young men—who continue to revere the man and his methods—is divisive. However, director Jon Kretzu (who recently directed gay playwright Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*) clearly relishes the role of provocateur if it helps steer conversation toward questioning an education system's status quo.

Timothy Krause: Why *The History Boys*? Why now?

Jon Kretzu: It's just such a smart play. It's Shaw for 2008—the perfect combination of intellect and heart. Something about it is very universal: How do we teach? Why do we teach? What sacrifice does a teacher make? How thin is the line between the teacher/student relationship, and what happens when that line is smudged? And also how we think about history: What is history exactly? Is there a difference between male and female views of history? All of those things are very stimulating. If you don't go out and have a drink after this play and talk about it, then something's really wrong.

TK: What do you think this play says about being gay?

JK: The sexuality of the play is interesting because it's so fluid. It has a European sensibility toward sexuality that is different from an American sensibility. The kids are extremely cavalier about

how they experience their teacher's somewhat fumbling attempts at whatever he's doing with them on the motorbike. But also within their own sexuality, it's very open, and the sexual tension and sexual atmosphere that permeate the play are both very English but also English school, an all-male school in particular—just a way of life that's very different than we experience. But the sexuality has not been politicized in this play. It's just part of the plot, but not really the point of the plot. It's certainly not about being gay or the struggle to be gay; it's just a fact of these people's lives.

TK: Without giving away too much of the plot, the indiscreet teacher, among others, receives unusual twists of fate from unlikely sources, which might be considered poetic justice.

JK: It's really interesting to me and one of the most fascinating things in the play. It's the only selfless act of the character who causes that to happen. I sometimes wonder if Bennett does that on purpose just to play with your mind and make you go, "You really think you know people, but you don't."

TK: Is this any indication of the state of gay theater?

JK: How far have we come when in the other great play about gay teachers, *The Children's Hour*, she ends up hanging herself because she can't deal with it? Is it really that much of a difference? You kind of have to be a gay theater scholar to draw those lines. In Portland, it's business as usual: Gay themes are so integrated into theater, they occur so frequently and fluidly. And isn't that great? Isn't that what we want? Not to be segmented or



The *History Boys* trade barbs, bad puns and bawdy humor while pursuing a place at a good university.

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