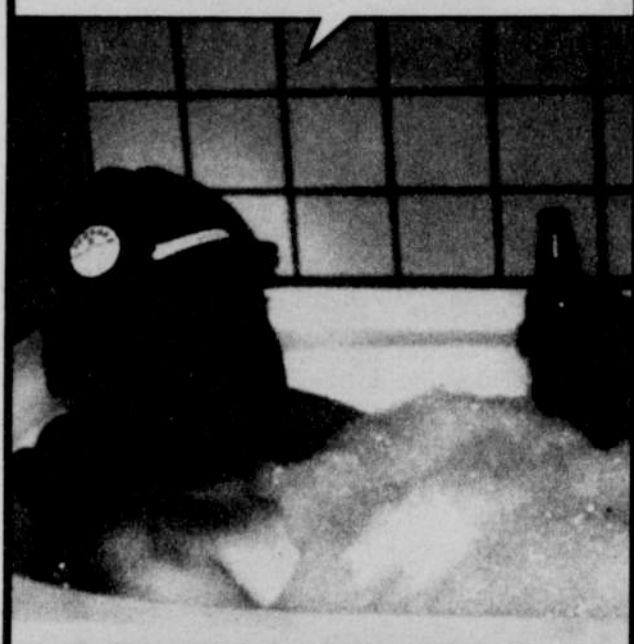


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Homecoming Queen

Tony Award winner returns to Oregon to help mount original play

by Chelsea Fine

A rare April snowstorm dusted the Ashland foothills and the campus of Oregon Shakespeare Festival all day, creating an ethereal glow on the landscape highlighted by a full moon during opening night for *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*.

Mother Nature couldn't have a set a more dramatic scene as moonlit silver clouds sliced through a midnight sky and flurries of snowflakes greeted the sold-out audience. Playwright Jeff Whitty—a former Oregonian who won a 2004 Tony Award for *Avenue Q*—stood under a pink patterned umbrella and watched the lobby swell as theatergoers passed by him, some recognizing him with hugs, handshakes and good wishes. Snowflakes dotted his black jacket, his dark, wind-tousled hair and his modernly manicured sideburns as a nervous smile played about his mouth. He then took his seat center row, mid-audience, and watched as the footlights came up on his first major production on Oregon soil.

Whitty witnessed his first professional theater experience in 1979 when he saw *Macbeth* on Ashland's Elizabethan Stage. Now 29 years later, the accomplished playwright has returned to the legendary Oregon Shakespeare Festival to help mount his original play *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*.

Born in 1972, the young and creative Whitty knew he wanted to be a part of theater as he grew up in Coos Bay, a small coastal town sandwiched between Eugene and Roseburg. He was lucky to find a small but professionally run company, On Broadway Theater (ironically on a street named Broadway), and was delighted to be on stage.

"I loved it," says Whitty. "I played the bad boy in Pinocchio, and it was a good part for me because I was out of touch with my body and movement, and it really made me grow."

After graduating from Marshfield High in Coos Bay, where he was a permanent fixture in school and community theater productions, Whitty majored in English at University of Oregon, where he continued to act and write.

Whitty moved to New York in 1993 after completing his degree, and his passion for working in theater never waned. He found a job as a waiter at Joe Allen, a restaurant known to be a pit stop for

the city's thespian crowd. At the time he'd fallen in love with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and many of the cast and crew frequented the establishment. Whitty was starstruck and found that some of them had attended school at New York University; it was then that he applied to Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Over the next three years he honed his writing and acting skills while networking, eventually garnering a literary agent and a master's degree in 1997.

The young playwright penned several scripts, including *The Hiding Place*, *The Plank Project*, *Balls*, *Suicide Weather* and *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*, mostly darker comedies. One of his readings of *The Plank Project*, a satirical take

we just had one of our best weekends yet," says Whitty. "Everyone said it would be a hard sell outside of New York, but knock on wood...."

After the success of *Avenue Q*, Whitty was able to turn his attention to some of his original work, mounting support for and producing *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler* at South Coast Repertory Theater in Costa Mesa, Calif. The director of that 2006 production was Bill Rauch, who now is at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in his freshman season as artistic director. Exactly two years to the date after the opening in California, Rauch reunited with Whitty and several of the original cast members and crew to present only the second staging of the play in Ashland.

Whitty came to Oregon for the first two weeks of rehearsals, then came back two weeks before the opening to go through tech and dress rehearsals. He flew into Portland; spent some time in Coos Bay with his family, who still live in the home where he grew up; and stopped in Eugene before heading down to work in Ashland.

"It was wonderful to be home and drive to rehearsal; I loved it," says Whitty of the picturesque commute from Coos Bay to Ashland.

Whitty adds that he's enjoying his first Oregon Shakespeare Festival production. "It has been great; the actors are incredible," he says. "I have never worked in a



A national tour of *Avenue Q* lands in Portland next month.

on productions like *The Laramie Project*, landed him on the radar of producer Robyn Goodman, who was working with the initial creative team of *Avenue Q* to find a book writer for the musical.

"Are you interested in a musical starring puppets?" his agent asked. It was Whitty's job to take several songs that had been created by the lyricists and create a story arc and plot.

"It was the only project I had been involved with that had backing and had real potential," he says. "The stakes felt very high; I was rewriting even into the final production, but after seeing it thousands of times, I feel like it's done."

Avenue Q was produced off-Broadway before meeting with critical acclaim, then it moved to Broadway's Golden Theater, where it won three Tonys, including a Best Book award for Whitty. The musical is still running on the Great White Way, recently opened at London's Noël Coward Theatre and began a national tour this year; look for it to land in Portland next month.

"I love the tour; everyone does a great job, and

regional theater this great."

Before returning to New York, Whitty plans to recharge his batteries at a Radical Faerie sanctuary in Short Mountain, Tenn. He has decided to slow down his pace a bit, as he has been working nonstop for the past several years.

To relax at home, Whitty indulges in one of his favorite pastimes: video games. He loves his Xbox 360; one of his favorite games is *Oblivion*, which took weeks to complete.

"I love the structure, and I need epic storytelling in a game, but the writing is usually pretty bad," he says. "I would love to write video games one day; I love quest-inspired games."

Whitty lives in New York City with his boyfriend of six years, Steve, also a writer. While their primary residence is in the Village, they share a country house two hours north of the city, where he keeps his Tony Award. "It's a weird thing to find a place for," says Whitty, who has a propensity for collecting odd items. "I have a collection of vintage trophies from the '50s with different

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