

theater

Life's a Butch

Gender-bending characters contain multitudes

Pony

"Are you ready?"

This is Portland Center Stage artistic director Chris Coleman's standard line when he faces the packed crowds at the theater's annual Just Add Water Festival. And by standard we mean much-loved; Coleman imparts a furtive intimacy with the audience when introducing the world premiere works-in-progress, known as PCS' most adventurous offerings of the year. Whether Coleman himself is ready or not, his hair is usually blown back by the immediate audience response: "Wooooooooooooooooo!!!"

In addition to the four staged readings that have traditionally comprised the heart of the festival, a gaggle of events awaits you. But your queer eye for the JAW Festival will point you straight to Sally Oswald's *Pony*.

Pony is a pitch-black queer drama based on Georg Buchner's 1837 play *Woyzeck*, that hilarious German romp in which a man goes crazy after undergoing medical experimentation and stabs his girlfriend. In working on the project Oswald was, in her own words via e-mail, "driving myself insane trying to write a play about some butches in some woods."

Oswald's casting notes call for three characters to be "self-styled masculine-leaning genders," including butch or transgender actors. Two other characters are women, including a violence-prone answer to Buchner's Marie.

"I think it's important to get gritty, complex and heartbreakingly honest portrayals out there—especially serious images of masculine women or trans men. Somehow they continue to be taboo, even in queer media," Oswald notes.

What she's done about it is to co-found ButchCastingProject.com, a Web site connecting butch-seeking producers with performers. Look for blog posts from Portland during the week leading up to *Pony*'s JAW debut.

Although *Pony* presents a dangerous world, its instantly recognizable characters, haunted by transition and change, pull the audience in. "I want to write plays that give the audience space to be creative and sit with something strange and new," Oswald shares of her aspirations, "and to enjoy sparks of unexpectedness in themselves."

The 10th JAW Festival runs through July 20 in Gerding Theater at the Armory, 128 N.W. 11th Ave. For the complete schedule visit www.pcs.org/jaw.

—Jessica Wallenfels

Man to Man

Virginia Woolf's famous, centuries- and gender-spanning novel *Orlando*, published in 1928, illu-

minated history while contemplating the limits and possibilities of gender: What supposedly makes a man a man, a woman a woman, and how have these concepts played into the history of humankind?

German playwright Manfred Karge's 1982 one-person piece *Man to Man*, which is receiving a new production in Portland, reverses Woolf's trajectory: Rather than sliding from male to female, its protagonist starts out as male and goes on to assume femaleness—and takes up, chronologically speaking, almost exactly where *Orlando* left off. (Interestingly, film versions of both *Orlando* and *Man to Man* were released in the early '90s, both with Tilda Swinton playing the gender-traversing lead.) *Man to Man* is an important (if unofficial) continuation of Woolf's project—a gender-switching journey that spans from the 1920s and 1980s, when world historical events caught the people of Germany in the crossfire as that nation lurched from the libertine Weimar Republic to the rise of Nazism to postwar American occupation/reconstruction and Cold War division.



Sally Oswald hopes to boost honest portrayals of masculine women and trans men.

Every character in Karge's play—men, women, old, young, ultimately running to dozens of characters in addition to central personage Ella-Gerickle, a widowed woman who takes on her departed husband's male identity—is meant to be played by one actor in a sort of onstage manifestation of Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes." In this case, the multitudes will be contained within the talented, accomplished English actress Taru Sinclair, in a produc-

tion presented by the avant-garde U.K.-based theater company The Kelman Group.

The group has a close connection to Portland: Founder Bob Lockwood, who is directing the play, studied and collaborated with the late Scott Kelman—a storied figure in American theater and a long-term Portland resident—and the group, with its commitment to provocative, political performance work across varied media, grew out of (and was named after) Lockwood's embrace of Kelman's ideas and techniques. With *Man to Man*, its third project here since 2003, The Kelman Group is offering to Rose City theatergoers perhaps its most ambitious work to date—a unique, challenging performance experience based in that foundational queer theory that posits the malleability of gender once exposed to the liberating power of the human imagination.

Man to Man runs through Aug. 2 at Hipbone Studio, 1847 E. Burnside St. Tickets are \$8-\$10 from 971-212-2554.

—Christopher McQuain

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