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Role Play

PCS artistic director Chris Coleman changes hats to act in *Opus*

BY KIRA LESLEY

For over a decade, Chris Coleman has played many roles as artistic director of Portland Center Stage. This month, he's taking on a new one—actor.

Although Coleman has performed extensively throughout his career, this is his first time on stage in Portland. He portrays Elliot in the current PCS production of *Opus*, which examines the inner workings of a world-class string quartet. He calls the play a “delicious insider look at how you make great music and the intensity of the relationships.”

In *Opus*, violist-turned-playwright Michael Hollinger focuses on the fictional Lazara Quartet. A few days before the group is to give a televised performance for the president, their violist suffers a mental breakdown, leaving the remaining three scrambling for a replacement. In the process, the audience

gets an insider's glimpse of the interpersonal relationships, emotions and tensions that exist behind the group's onstage perfection.

Elliot is first violinist, and partner of the ousted violist. Coleman says he was drawn to the character because “he's a brilliant guy, acerbic and quite funny ... and he's scary, his anger is scary.” In addition, he saw something behind the anger: “Inevitably, when someone's that prickly [as Elliot] it's because they're hurt ... so it's fascinating to try to get in this guy's mind, his experience,” Coleman says.

Although personally not as volatile as Elliot, Coleman says he identifies with the

anger one can hold as a result of growing up gay. “What happens to the shame you experience growing up, if you don't find some way to heal it, inevitably, it pathologizes,” he observes. “You drink too much, or you screw too much, or you work too much.”

In his own life, he got on the work-too-much track. “My M.O. was to achieve,” the director and performer says. When he was younger, he thought, “I will be a super achiever and that will hide my secret and make me invulnerable to being called names,” Coleman explains.

He shared some of those insecurities in a video inspired by Dan Savage's “It Gets Better” project. In the YouTube clip, Coleman talks about the depression and isolation he felt watching his heterosexual friends' romantic relationships and believing their experi-

ences were something he would never have. As he states in the video, he threw himself into “achieving” to compensate.

Coleman grew up in Atlanta, where he attended a Southern Baptist church. It was also in Atlanta that he would develop strong ties with the gay community. He cofounded the highly respected Actor's Express Theatre Company in 1988 and served as artistic director there for 12 years, receiving many accolades, before coming to PCS in 2000.

According to Coleman, the production that put Actor's Express on the map was the 1991 original musical *The Harvey Milk Show*. Coleman starred as the gay rights

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—CHRIS COLEMAN,
ON HIS CHARACTER IN *OPUS*

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