



CULTURE CLUB

STAGE STRUCK

Chris Coleman, Artistic Director at Portland Center Stage, opens up about his life and career.

“My mom was an actress. She wanted to be an actress.” Chris Coleman explains, “my folks came from a very small town in South Georgia and they were both the first people in their families to go to college.” Instead of heading to New York after college, Coleman’s mother fell in love, married and began a family. But that wasn’t the end of her career in theatre, “She started a drama ministry in our Southern Baptist church. Literally from the time I can remember I was doing something to help out. I was operating a little dimmer board or reading the lines to the actors.”

“It was always part of my world,” says Coleman; “By late high school I was either going to be a teacher, a preacher or an actor. I got involved with the theatre group in college my freshman year, and I just became obsessed. At that time I was going to do theatre as a mission.”

“Then I turned 20,” Coleman continues, “and had my first serious relationship with a guy. I fell in love and it was really depressing [because] it was such a crisis of faith. At the time the only two openly gay men I knew were self-destructive. In my junior year I was looking forward and thinking, ‘so this is what my life is going to be.’ It was so depressing. To that point my whole community had been the church and I had to walk away from that.”

These matters came to a head when, Coleman recounts, “I had been dating a guy for about four months. Initially we said it was going to be casual. Finally he said ‘this is not casual for me, I’ve fallen in love.’ It was so terrifying because I was going to actually say, ‘I’m gay.’ But it was the notion of losing him. I couldn’t walk away from that. From then it was, ‘I’m not going to work so much in the mission field, I’ll stay with the theatre.’”

After college Coleman cofounded and ran a successful small theatre in Atlanta, called Actor’s Express. He zeroed in on political material that had a large draw. He spent twelve years growing the theatre and running it in the black all the while. In 2000 a search committee was looking for a person who could take over the fledgling, and not terribly successful, Portland Center Stage. What could have lured him from a very solid and familiar company? Did Portland play a role in his attraction?

“I wasn’t aware that a city like Portland existed in America,” says Coleman. “(One) that is so compact that you could actually walk to work and there is a really vibrant downtown. There is a lot going on culturally, but still it’s not huge. There was an initial attraction to the city. But I really tried not to take the job. I put every obstacle up that I could resist, and the search committee just kept saying, ‘Okay, we can do that. We can make that happen.’ There was such a hunger on their part. They knew [PCS] had not worked, and they were ready for bold, radical action. That hooked me, because I really wanted to see if you could re-invent one of these big regional theatres.”

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Coleman has been content in Portland, although a few other theatres have come wooing over the past years. Has he settled into Portland, or could he still be lured away?

“When I look at opportunities at other regional theatres the most compelling thing is you would have deeper resources, more of an endowment. You’d have the ability to commission more new plays... to say yes to more complex idiosyncratic projects. What you’d lose is a community that’s incredibly fun to live in. It also has to do with what is happening here, in this building. Last year we had 355 community events. There’s not another theatre in the country that comes even close to that. And, we have an audience that will, most of the time, say yes to what we hand them. That’s drastically different than it was 11 years ago. We’ve brought them along, and most regional theatre audiences are more conservative, aesthetically than the one we’ve built here.” ■

Reach out with your events to Arts & Entertainment Editor Ken Hoyt. ken@justout.com