

# Gay icons meet eternity

## In Jeffrey Hartgraves' 'Carved in Stone'

by Richard Dodds

Fear of death brought Jeffrey Hartgraves to San Francisco, and fear of non-stop wacky quacky action convinced him it was time to quit his day job after he got here.

It was seven years ago that Hartgraves, author of the celestially gay comedy *Carved in Stone*, fled his native Arizona after a brush with death. "I looked at my partner and said, 'Dying in Arizona is redundant.' Thirty days later, we were here."

Hartgraves landed a full-time job writing ad copy, but that came to an end the day he wrote a TV commercial promising consumers "non-stop wacky quacky action."

"The money is good," he said, "but it's not that good."

Now he writes what he wants to write, be it fiction or poetry or drama, and one of the results of this creative freedom is the play *Carved in Stone*, opening Aug. 9 at the Eureka Theatre. It is a farcical paean to the mentors of most contemporary gay writers: Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Truman Capote, and Quentin Crisp.

The play is set in the afterlife, at a crossroads where not only the

above foursome congregate, but through which pass such other pop and historical icons as Judy Garland, Bette Davis, and William Shakespeare.

"We have this kind of wonky elevator, which is sort of Dr. Seussical, that leads into this room. Our concept of the afterlife is that you could run into anyone who you might have something in common with. Which also explains why Bette Davis and William Shakespeare end up coming off that elevator together. I have no idea what I was drinking the night I wrote that."

Actually, Hartgraves did considerable research into his subjects, making sure that the attitudes and philosophies he attributes to them are accurate. "And the actors have also been amazing as far as the research they've been doing," Hartgraves said.

Hartgraves happens to be one of those actors, playing Tennessee Williams, and it is the actor playing Quentin Crisp who spurred him to write the play in the first place.

"Leon Acord called me one night and he said, 'I would really like to play Quentin Crisp, and you should write me a solo show.' Twenty minutes later, I called him back and said, 'I really have an in-

teresting idea, and the bad news is that it's not a solo show.'"

If Acord flinched, it was only momentarily. He is not only still playing Crisp, but he is also co-producing the play with Hartgraves.

Acord and Hartgraves got acquainted when both were acting in Ronnie Larsen's *A Few Gay Men*, and that cast also provided the new show's director, John Fisher, and its Truman Capote, P.A. Cooley. Matt Weimer is playing Oscar Wilde, with Matthew Martin and 'Drew Todd playing all the other famous souls passing through.

There is one more character, the young protagonist who is also gay and also a writer, played by David Tenenbaum. "The show is about assumptions," Hartgraves said. "When this new guy shows up, all these wonderful intellects believe they know who and what he is, but the more information that's revealed, the more these people have to start changing their perspective."

The play is by turns serious, campy, bitchy, and funny. "And with John Fisher involved, it keeps getting funnier every day," the actor-playwright said. "It's actually a farce, in a manner of speaking. It's hyperrealism. And when you take people who are already caricatures in people's minds, pushing it that little extra bit wasn't really difficult."

Hartgraves has only lately got involved in San Francisco theater,



Playwright Hartgraves: 'I have no idea what I was drinking that night.'

a scene he found to be "clique-y" when he first got here. "When it gets to the point where people can't see what you're trying to do, then you just go and do it yourself," he said. "I have a hard time with the concept of vanity productions, but I'm not bothered so much with this piece because if enough other people hadn't entered the fray, it probably wouldn't be happening."

But then again, it might. A past regret has convinced him to never let dreams slip away again.

"It's a horrible story," Hartgraves said. "I started doing gay standup comedy in 1982 in Phoenix, and I was actually asked to come to Los Angeles and audi-

tion for the Carson show. But I was in a bad relationship at the time, and I ended up not going. Isn't that pathetic?"

"But you know what's great about it? Nothing really, but I can rationalize it to some extent. It is a moment in my life that I always look back on and say, 'You know how much you regretted that. Don't do it again.' So every time I have an idea and really believe in it, absolutely nothing will stop me." ▼

**Carved in Stone will run Aug. 9-31 at the Eureka Theatre. Tickets are \$17-\$20. Call 778-4077.**