



Paper, Scissors, S

Gay Playwright Carves Up A New Perspective

Carved in Stone. In Jeffrey Hartgraves' comedy, the late great literary queers of history—Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde and Truman Capote, as well as Quentin Crisp, conduct an afterlife literary salon where they can bitch and kvetch through eternity, with periodic visits from other dead camp and literary icons (see Spotlight, page 26). Aug. 9–31. Wednesdays–Saturdays at 8 p.m. \$17–\$20. Eureka Theater, 215 Jackson St. Call (415) 778-4077 or visit www.LeonAcord.com.

SAN FRANCISCO
FRONTIERS
NEWSMAGAZINE
Volume 21, Number 8

August 8, 2002 San Francisco Frontiers

The dead can neither confirm nor deny anything. For the average soul, this is probably of little concern, and the living are usually left to presume what Grandma or Great Uncle Harry might have thought or done in the face of a given circumstance. In the case of the famous and recently departed, however, there is an ongoing fascination with really knowing Marilyn, Elvis, Judy and others who captured our imaginations and then left, often too soon. But do we ever really know? And does the possibility for knowing stop at death's door? These are some of the questions posed by *Carved in Stone*, a new comedy by San Francisco playwright Jeffrey Hartgraves that is making its world premiere at the Eureka Theatre.

From his eclectically decorated flat in Hayes Valley, Hartgraves recalls, "A couple of years ago, Leon [Acord] and I were working on a solo show of his and he called one night with this idea that he wanted to play Quentin Crisp in something and that I should write a one-man show for him. About 20 minutes later I called him back and said, 'Well, the good news is that I have an idea. The bad news

is that it is *not* a solo show.'" In Hartgraves' vision, Crisp was joined by fellow literati Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Oscar Wilde.

Within months of the call, Hartgraves had enough of an outline to plan a well-received staged reading. A few drafts later, an angel—of the financial variety—appeared to start the fundraising effort on the condition that Hartgraves agree to serve as both playwright and performer. "I really didn't want to do that, but it was enough money that I had to reconsider," he says, "which is how I ended up in the show." Hartgraves essays Tennessee Williams, with creative muse

Leon Acord assuming his desired role of Quentin Crisp, and P.A. Cooley and Matt Weimer rounding out the lavender literary quartet as Truman Capote and Oscar Wilde, respectively. Into this fantasy gathering of late greats comes the aptly named fictional character Gryphon Tott, a young gay literary sensation played by David Tenenbaum who stirs the Stygian waters by refusing to conform to what the elder queens know about him. Or what they *think* they know about him.

"That's the thrust of the piece," says Hartgraves. "That we don't know everything and nothing is really carved in stone. People make up their minds about people and circumstances, thinking that they have enough information. As human beings we do that. Someone will say, 'Oh, I know about gay people!' and they don't, really, because almost everyone's opinion about gay people will change when they realize that they know a gay person. That is the first entrée into changing someone's mind—to give them more information." This educational spin should in no way imply that the play is some heavy-handed treatise on judgment and understanding. Quite the contrary, given Hartgraves' description of a fantasy that borders on farce. Says the author, "It's kind of like having rubies set in the eyes of a rubber chicken!"

The show is set in a lounge, a sort of afterlife intersection. With shadings of Rod Serling's "The Twilight Zone" and Steve Allen's "Meeting of Minds," famous people arrive and leave through a celestial elevator, pausing to make an observation or take care of some unfinished business. In the hands of featured performers Matthew Martin and Drew Todd, a parade of gay icons—Bette Davis, Judy Garland and Alice B. Toklas—make cameo appearances to comment on or contribute to the action.

Hartgraves finds nothing improbable in the eclectic mix. "It is said that when we die we are met 'on the other side' by people who are important to us who have gone before. So, what if the afterlife were this massive database with all these cross-references, and you have to go through this endless series of sorts ... perhaps for all



eternity? It's not all that unlikely that these particular people might show up in the case of a gay writer."

The use of famous, real people in fictional settings is always a balancing act between artistic license and pedantry. Wilde is gone from us long enough to be played within reasonable proximity. However, documentary evidence of Capote and Williams, who died in the early '80s, and Crisp, with us until 1999, is readily available. Hartgraves does not fear the inevitable opinions that *Carved in Stone* does not accurately portray these legendary figures.

"I would defy a roomful of people who had met Capote, studied him or were friends of his to come up with a single definitive description. They all knew a different person. So even if it were possible to be 100 percent accurate on who Truman Capote was, there would be someone who met him at a cocktail party who would say, 'Well that's not Capote at all!' So I don't think the show will please people looking for that type of thing. We are aiming toward more of an *bonnage* ... to suggesting their essence and the public representations of their personas. That isn't to say that all the actors haven't been studying their characters. You just can't ever capture all of one person."

Performing his own work is not a new experience for Hartgraves, though he did not write this role with himself in mind. "I have performed in my own plays before and I knew this project would be a major investment of time for the actors. Frankly, I thought it would be much more fun to be on the sidelines and watch it develop, because wearing too many hats is a pain in the ass." A former Phoenician in the Bay Area for seven years now, he knows from where he speaks, having spent two years as associate artistic director of Planet Earth Multi-Cultural Theatre and currently serving as artistic director of Theatre Shark, one of the presenting entities for *Carved in Stone*.

Recently, he got to wear the singular hat of audience member for one of his works, having had no hand in the production. "It was a college festival of one-acts in Antioch. I was grouped with Dorothy Parker and Garrison Keillor, which I thought was very interesting. Just before my play started, they made the announcement, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the next selection contains adult language and situations.'" He laughs. "It was worth the drive just to hear that. I

had no idea I was smutty! I am the Robert Mapplethorpe of small theater!"

Single-hatted again, he plans to attend an upcoming San Diego production of his play *Shades of Gray*, inspired by Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He says: "Theater is a collaborative effort. You have to trust the artists you have joined forces with to bring their vision to the work. And I don't think playwrights are necessarily the best choice for directors. We all think our children are wonderful, of course." Hearty laughter gives way to more composed thoughts. "I do like to be involved [in productions] to answer contextual questions, to give subtext to the words on the page. I think it's great to have the author available for that. If we were able to ask Shakespeare, 'What the hell did you mean by that?' we'd have a much clearer understanding of his work.

"From the other side, seeing someone else's interpretation of your work helps you refine your own style and be clearer about what you want to communicate as an artist. When you finish a script on paper, you're in something of an impressionist phase. When you go into rehearsal, it's more Ansel Adams. Everything becomes focused—particularly in the first production of a new work."

As if on cue, a production call comes from the play's director, John Fisher. Hartgraves, off to collaborate and refine, sums up: "Ultimately, *Carved in Stone*—like much of my other work—is about perspective, that our reality changes based on the amount of information we hold. And that it can change from generation to generation. At one time, people believed the world was flat. And for all of civilization at that time there was no debate that it was. With more information and some perspective, that changed." **F**

Carved in Stone, a Theatre Shark and Larilee Productions presentation, runs Aug. 9–31 at the Eureka Theatre, 215 Jackson St. in San Francisco. Evening performances are scheduled Wednesdays–Saturdays at 8 p.m. Sunday matinee performances are at 3 p.m. Ticket prices are \$17 for Wednesday and Sunday shows, \$20 for all other performances and can be purchased with a credit card by calling (415) 778-4077.

Robert Sokol is a freelance writer and founder of VIA MEDIA, a creative consulting firm. E-mail sent to Robert@ViaMedia.net is guaranteed to get his attention!