

'I wish I had seen this play in high school'

Jeffrey Solomon discusses his new show about teens' and teachers' struggle for acceptance

by Kaizaad Kotwal

Columbus—Two years ago, Jeffrey Solomon came to town as part of the National Gay and Lesbian Theater Festival and rocked Ohio audiences with two amazing shows: *MotherSON* and *Santa Claus is Coming Out*. These solo pieces received top honors at the 2002 festival—Best of the Festival, Best Director, Best Technical Elements and Best Male Solo Performer.

Solomon returns to this year's National Gay and Lesbian Theater Festival, but as director of a new piece he has written called *Building Houses on the Moon*. This is a touring play about the struggle for acceptance by LGBT youth and educators. The play is being co-sponsored by the Columbus chapter of P-FLAG, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and the Kaleidoscope Youth Coalition, two groups who are active in the struggle for GLBT youth equality and related issues.

The piece, produced by Houses on the Moon Theater Co., was inspired by internet posts from LGBT youth around the world, as well as interviews with students and educators. It deals with gender and sexual orientation identity issues, the role of straight allies, homophobia, family and peer relationships, and inclusion and safety at school.

The vignettes feature two actors playing multiple roles, including a transgender college boy assigned to the girl's dorm, a teacher under the gun when her support for a gay student leads to the school's first same-sex prom couple, and a junior high school girl's sleep-over where pressure to conform is taken to a new level by Justin Timberlake's number one fan. This mosaic of remarkable stories evoke the isolation but also the courage and hopefulness of youth on the frontier of inclusion.

Solomon talked about his latest venture from his home in Philadelphia.

What have you gained personally from working on this production?

Jeffrey Solomon: In researching the play, I got to meet so many pioneers and unsung heroes—like the 15-year-old high school sophomore who became the first person in her school to come out. Or the elementary school social worker, a straight married woman who was accused by her town of being a lesbian because she brought in books affirming LGBT families. Or the second-grade teacher whose simple honest response to his student's question about his married status prompted a huge controversy and a district policy banning the discussion of homosexuality without parental permission.

This is a remarkable time because the unprecedented visibility of gay images and

the unwillingness of gay people, and those who care for them, to stay silent. The most meaningful part of working on this production has been the ability to hear these true stories and then find a way to translate them to the stage so that countless young people and adults can also be as moved and engaged by them as I was.

Do you wish you had seen such a play when you were that age?

and fear begins to dissipate.

What is next for you?

Houses on the Moon is touring a brand new play of mine called *Tara's Crossing* which deals with political asylum for LGBT people in the U.S. This has been a remedy available to refugees since 1994 if they can prove they are being persecuted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

What is next for this show?

AMY C. ELLIOTT



Carlo D'amore and Emily Weiner are two junior high school girls in Jeffrey Solomon's *Building Houses on the Moon*.

Yes, I wish I had seen such a play in high school.

I wish anyone had sent me the simple message: "You are okay." I think this play does that with lots of humor and humanity.

Do straight kids have anything to gain from seeing this show?

Gay stories are not just for gay people. This play is just as much about how to be an ally if your friend or family member comes out to you. It also deals with homophobic violence, which is obviously an issue that must be addressed by the entire community. I think young people are dying to talk about the 500-pound purple elephant in the room. They are hungry for some discussion and some information. Even the most stereotypical macho jock, the kid who is squirming in his chair uncomfortably during our performance or making homophobic jokes to his friends, is dying to talk about it.

The same kid will ask, "Um, so, are you like, really gay?" And I'm like, "Yes, really. I really am gay." And something amazing has happened in that simple exchange. The invisible has become visible. The unmentionable has become mentionable. And the ignorance

We are touring extensively. We expect to do a show some time this fall for high school administrators for Philadelphia Public Schools. The most exciting aspect of the show is that adults and youth find it equally entertaining, so we can perform *Building Houses on the Moon* during the day for the students, after school for a teacher training and then at night for the whole community. We have been searching for the right partner to put together a film version of the play that can be presented as entertainment but also packaged educationally with a teacher's resource guide.

The play will have its Ohio premiere with performances on September 15 at 7 pm, September 17 at 8 pm and September 18 at 4 pm at the Columbus Performing Arts Center, 549 Franklin Ave.

For more information on the play, see www.housesonthemoon.org on the web. For more information on P-FLAG, call 614-227-9355 or e-mail pinkleton@hotmail.com. For information on Kaleidoscope Youth Coalition, see www.kaleidoscope.org or call 614-294-7886.