

## Theater of Empowerment: An Interview with Craig Cabot and Michael Evans

Hugh Coyle

BURLINGTON -- For actor Craig Cabot and director Michael Evans, there is no reprieve from the work of theater, not even sitting on the third floor of Bruegger's Bagel Bakery on a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon. Though they have come to meet for an interview, the three hours that follow develop into something more like a rehearsal. They discuss motivation, wrestle with inner demons, and test new insights into character as they talk about their collaboration on the play *Jeffrey* and the upcoming *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*.

In January, Cabot, who captivated audiences with his recent performance as the title character in *Jeffrey*, will take the stage alone in the Vermont premiere of David Drake's popular one-man play. Evans will once again direct.

"I've never learned so much so fast," Cabot says, referring to his time spent in rehearsal. "You're looking at a Craig that's going through tremendous changes. I'm learning things about myself that I hadn't learned, ever. I'm learning a new sense of confidence that I've never ever had as a direct result of doing plays that validate myself as a gay man."

For Cabot, this validation has become crucial to understanding plays like *Jeffrey* and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*. Moving beyond the scope of theater, he observes how years of oppression have shaped gay identity, offering positive and negative possibilities for the creation of a healthy community. "It's very troubling to come to this realization, that you are who you are in part because you have been

oppressed, because people have hated you. So part of your identity is based on that hatred. I think that manifests itself in the way we treat each other."

Plays like *Jeffrey*, which deals with a man re-learning how to love in the age of AIDS, allowed Cabot to meditate on what it meant for a gay man not only to love another man, but to love himself as well. "As gay men we are victims far more than we know," he explains. "Without examining who we are, and questioning who we are, we can find ourselves exhibiting behavior as a result of being oppressed. By examining that process, you can turn it into a strength."

Cabot is quiet for a moment, then talks more openly about his own process of self-examination in rehearsing for the part of *Jeffrey*. "It was the first time in my life to realize as a gay man that I harbored a low self-esteem in myself that I never ever recognized. It was very latent, and very subliminal, and part of that was the words and terminology I had learned and that I had been accustomed to using for gay people."

Cabot thinks back to his participation in a workshop on homophobia at November's Queer Town Meeting. "That workshop meant everything in the world to me," he says with a serious severity. "These are things that I've been feeling for so much of my life. I've known that the concepts that I have are not entirely ones that I made up. They were given to me by my folks, by my society. You can't go through life blindly ignoring where you came from. You have to come to terms with that. That makes you a better actor, that makes you a better doctor; that makes you a better social worker. We as a gay community

have a long ways to go, and we're finding that out now."

Evans nods his head in agreement. He then relates how Cabot first approached his role as *Jeffrey*, infusing the character with a great deal of bitterness and contempt. Once they both recognized that and examined it more closely, the play opened up and revealed to them much more than they had expected.

For both Cabot and Evans, the work has come to encompass a great deal of that examination. It serves as an effective means of reflection and, subsequently, of empowerment. Evans elaborates, stating "*Larry Kramer* is about an individual dealing with the empowerment of himself and of the whole gay culture, with the transformation from victimization to empowerment. Every scene starts out in a place of disempowerment and ends up with empowerment. *Jeffrey* and *Larry Kramer* say you are real, that your experience is real. It's a positive reflection. The message isn't one of us/them. The message is we're all human; we all love. The power of the plays isn't just for a gay community; it's for everybody."

The fact that Evans, a straight man, is directing Cabot, a gay man, in a gay-themed play leads to a number of interesting discussions. As the two men talk, they constantly push at the boundaries of interpretation, resisting easy classifications and revelling in the expansive breadth of the works in question.

"I don't want the audience to think that this is a gay play," Cabot explains. "I don't want them to think that the name 'Larry Kramer' makes this a political play, either.

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