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Stage

When worlds collide

By Arnold Wayne Jones Life+Style Editor

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## A gay man and a preacher's wife form an unlikely friendship in 'Six Dance Lessons,' a profound comedy about cultural invisibility

### ONE TWO CHA CHA CHA

"Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks," Theatre Too in the Quadrangle.

Aug. 28–Sept. 20 (in previews this weekend). Thursdays and Aug. 31 at 7:30 p.m., Fridays–Saturdays at 8 p.m. Sundays at 2:30 p.m. \$20–\$30.

Bob Hess and Terry Dobson are both men "of a certain age" — which in the gay world means over 30 (not to say 40!) ... and, therefore, culturally invisible. Maybe that's what attracted both of them to the script of "Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks."

Hess had not even heard of the play when Dobson asked him to read it.

"I originally wanted to play the vice principal in 'The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee' [this season], but Terry said, 'Well, there's a show running concurrently I really want you to read for.' I did, and let's just say an actor doesn't turn a role like this down," he says.



ART IMITATING LIFE: Actor Bob Hess and director Terry Dobson both identified with the middle-aged gay man in 'Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks.' ARNOLD WAYNE JONES/Dallas Voice

The two-character comedy-drama involves Lily, an elderly widow, who hires a dance instructor to teach her to tango, cha-cha, waltz, etc. In walks her flamboyantly queenie teacher Michael (Hess) — and worlds collide.

"A play about a Southern Baptist preacher's wife and a Southern middle-aged gay man — let's let Terry direct it!" Dobson jabs about how he was selected to helm this production, which opens Friday in previews in the Theatre Too downstairs space at Theatre Three. Like Hess, he was unfamiliar with the script before he got the assignment, but as he read it, "I just immediately thought of Bob in it. It's quite a wonderful play."

The pedigree of "Six Dance Lessons" outshines its familiarity. The 2003 Broadway version starred Mark Hamill and Polly Bergen; an L.A. production starred David Hyde Pierce and Uta Hagen.

"It has a real cult following," Hess says. And he now counts himself among its cultists.

“The play is about these two people who find a commonality between themselves,” Hess says. “A contentious relationship becomes a loving relationship over time. The core is the realization that as drastically different as they are, ultimately they are two very lonely people” who find they have much in common.

Hess was drawn to how the playwright, Richard Alfieri, drew parallels between how the aged and even youngish gay men can feel irrelevant within their communities.

“Lily’s elderly and she’s talking about when you reach an age, you begin to disappear. As a late-40s gay man, the same thing has happened to Michael.” Many gay men, Hess observes, start off as twinks, then mature into hot men of whatever age, before becoming invisible to other men. “It’s that ability to see from each others’ perspective that intrigued me,” Hess says.

Well, that and its sense of humor.

“Michael is a very recognizable character to me: He’s that bitchy queen who comes up with quips and barbs because he doesn’t want to let people in too close. But I like a lot of the gay humor — they aren’t the typical gay jokes. There’s a lot about gay life and being a gay man. And elderly people will see this play and love it, glomming on to the ageism jokes.”

“It’s funny and moving,” Dobson adds.

“There are lots of great lines about homophobia and ageism,” Hess agrees. “One line is, ‘Beautiful people, I have discovered can, get away with very few social skills.’ There’s lots of insights in that.”

For his part, Dobson takes an upbeat approach to ageing.

“My 50s have been great so far,” he says. “And my 40s were good too. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: It just keeps getting better.”

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