Written by Mike Schulz
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For the final production in her company's 10th-anniversary season, New Ground Theatre Artistic Director Chris Jansen chose to direct a rather epic piece: the debuting period drama *Under the Radar* , which features numerous plotlines and changes of locale, and concerns our area's gay scene in the late 1970s, with particular attention paid to the relationship of one long-term gay couple.

Based on that description, it sounds as though Jansen is tackling a Quad Cities-based, pre-AIDS version of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Yet when, with a good-natured laugh, she says of the mammoth undertaking, "Some idiot wrote 11 characters into it," know that Jansen isn't being derogatory. At least, not toward anyone but herself.

"I'm against it, in theory," says Jansen of directing a play that she also wrote. "I do think playwrights should hand their scripts to another director – to just let it go and let your child grow up. But practically speaking, it was easier to do this one myself," especially because – at the time of our April 26 interview – *Under the Radar* was still in the process of being completed.

"There were so many stories that I wanted to tell that I had to ask myself the musical question, 'How many stories, in a play, are *too* many stories?'" She laughs. "And we haven't quite answered that yet. But I think it's important to get the stories out there. I mean, the play's about where we were on the road to where we *are*."

Jansen's sentiments are echoed by Joyce Wiley, interim executive director of Quad Citians Affirming Diversity (QCAD), the area not-for-profit that – through a grant by the Riverboat Development Authority – is wholly funding New Ground's latest presentation.

"It provides a picture for today's youth," says Wiley of *Under the Radar*, "to let them know what it was really like in the days before there was acceptance, or any kinds of protections."

Under the Radar will be staged at the Village Theatre from May 19 through 29, and its genesis, says Jansen, began “about two years ago. I’d been doing an anti-bullying project with QCAD, and a few of us were sitting around talking one day about how it was for the Quad Cities’ gay community back in the day. And I said, ‘Wow, that sounds like a play.’ And they said, ‘Yeah. It *does*
.’

“Our original idea was to focus on the ’50s and ’60s,” she continues, “when everything was underground and password-only ... . Really kind of a sad time. We quickly discovered, though, that our [research] sources for that time period were not plentiful. It was a bit too long ago.

“But then we had this idea that we could concentrate on the period right before the advent of AIDS, because someone said to me, ‘The Quad Cities really didn’t realize it *had* a gay community until AIDS hit.’

“So *Under the Radar* focuses on that time period, one that was very, very draconian by today’s standards, in that you could be fired for being gay – you’d actually be told, ‘You’re fired because you’re gay.’ When that was perfectly legal. And that was just, like, 30, 40 years ago. It’s horrifying, really.”

Jansen, a Davenport native who attended the University of Iowa in the 1970s (and who, for the record, is *not* gay), adds, “Having grown up here, *I* certainly don’t remember knowing anything about the gay community at that time.” And when it came to finding written information on the subject, she says, “It was really hard to research, because I did want to make the play specific to the Quad Cities. I didn’t want to generalize.”

Happily, though, Jansen soon found herself privy to numerous first-person accounts of area gay life in the ’70s via QCAD’s Gay & Gray, a social support and advocacy group for Quad Cities seniors.

“Really, you won’t have a better time than with that group,” says Jansen, with a laugh, of her discussions with members of Gay & Gray. “It’s a riot. They told me *great* stories.”

Through Gay & Gray’s men, among them group leader Clayton Peterson – “He’s an amazing man, and has been *so* much help,” says Jansen – *Under the Radar*’s playwright was given insight into the area’s largely undiscussed gay social scene.

“People sort of waxed eloquent and looked all nostalgic, talking about some people’s parties,” Jansen says. “There was quite a bit of activity at the Sunset Marina, from what I understand. Multi-boat parties. And there was the bar scene, of course, where you’d meet people, but also where you’d go be with people you could *relax* around. I heard that over and over from the Gay & Gray guys. It was just relaxing to be at a gay bar and know that nobody there was *judging* you.”

Not all of the stories shared, however, were happy ones. “Around the edges of the culture,” says Jansen, “there was all this physical threat – people being threatened down at the levee and things like that. There was a lot of social life, but still, at work, you didn’t really want to let anyone know you were gay. It was a cautious time where you needed to control the information. You needed to make sure that you knew *who* knew, and who didn’t, to keep your world stable.”

As a result of her research, the multi-narrative *Under the Radar* features subplots about one gay man’s difficulties in the workplace, and a gay couple’s efforts to conceal their relationship through redecorating. (“There’s a scene in the play where one guy’s mother is coming over for dinner,” says Jansen, “and the men have to make sure their guest room doesn’t *look* like a guest room. It has to look like the guys sleep in different rooms – like it’s a two-bedroom apartment.”)

Yet for all of Jansen’s success in speaking with Gay & Gray’s men, she says that she wasn’t, to her regret, able to get any first-person assistance for the *Under the Radar* subplot concerning a married woman embarking on a gay affair.

“I never got to talk to any women,” says Jansen “Never, never, never. I mean, I would make

appointments to meet with people, and I left messages, and I never heard anything." (With a laugh, Jansen says, "Somebody stood me up at Lagomarcino's one day. Which I guess is a great place to be stood up, right?")

"So that was a little bit frustrating," she continues. "But knowing what I did about the Quad Cities in the '70s, and having some information from the guys, I kind of pieced the story together."

Despite her play's subject matter, though, Jansen makes assurances that little about *Under the Radar* would make even the most homophobic viewer wince.

"The emphasis here is not on anything controversial," she states. "There's really no sex talked about or even implied – one little kiss, that's it. What we all wanted was to keep the emphasis firmly on the humanity of the characters, and showing that long-term gay couples are like *all* long-term couples, and that living together brings problems for *every* kind of person.

"I wished I could have fit in, somehow, that Iowa was one of the first states to have gay marriage," Jansen adds. "But I couldn't do it without it being awkward. Still, it's fascinating to look back at this point when gay people were just starting to be able to express themselves. And to see how our history, since then, has just accelerated. I think we take for granted, sometimes, how short a time ago it was that things were *very* different."

New Ground Theatre's Under the Radar *runs Thursdays through Sundays, May 19 through 29, at the Village Theatre (2113 11th Street in the Village of East Davenport). Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, and at 2 p.m. on Sundays. For more information and tickets, call (563)326-7529 or visit NewGroundTheatre.org .*

For more information on Quad Cities Affirming Diversity (1608 Second Avenue in Rock Island), call (309)786-2580 or visit QCAD-OutForGood.org .