



advancing theatre, enlivening culture

## NEWS RELEASE CALENDAR LISTING

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### TO PEEK OR NOT TO PEEK: STAGES OPENS 09-10 SEASON WITH SATIRIC COMEDY *SOUTHERN RAPTURE*

*Regional Premiere inspired by actual events puts a comic spin on offstage drama of culture war*

**Houston, TX** – Stages Repertory Theatre opens its 31<sup>st</sup> season with the regional premiere of Eric Coble's *Southern Rapture*, a pointed comedy about what can happen when drama behind the scenes overshadows the art presented on stage. Inspired by the real-life cultural controversy surrounding Charlotte Repertory Theatre's now infamous 1996 production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Coble's latest work is a wickedly funny look at the intersection between artists and audiences, and the delicate contract theatres have with their communities. Directed by Stages Producing Artistic Director Kenn McLaughlin and featuring Houston mainstays Sally Edmundson and Rutherford Cravens as key players in a stellar ensemble cast, *Southern Rapture* runs in Stages' Yeager Theater September 16 – October 11, 2009.

Charlotte Rep's 1996 production made national headlines—culminating in an embarrassing shouting match on *Good Morning America*—and polarized the Southern community. While Kushner's *Angels* explores several highly-charged issues, the crux of the controversy in Charlotte was the play's homosexual themes and eight seconds of full frontal male nudity—i.e., an actor's penis exposed on stage. Tony Brown, then the theatre critic for the *Charlotte Observer*, fanned the flames with front-page coverage of the play's challenging content. Protestors on both sides of the issue took to the streets. Opponents of the play sought legal recourse to prevent it from being performed, and in a dramatic down-to-the-wire court battle, a last-minute injunction—obtained by the theatre just hours before the production's scheduled opening—finally allowed the play to proceed.

But the drama didn't end there; a year after *Angels in America* premiered in Charlotte, the Mecklenburg County commissioners voted 5-4 to withdraw \$2.5 million in funding to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts and Science Council, specifically withholding funds from groups presenting what the commissioners called "perverted forms of sexuality". Some involved argue that this progression of events marked the beginning of the end for Charlotte Repertory Theatre, which finally closed its doors in 2005.

Meanwhile, at another Charlotte theatre—Actor's Theatre of Charlotte—Artistic Director Chip Decker saw comic potential in the *Angels* brouhaha. In an interview with *Creative Loafing*, Decker said, "You had people screaming on both sides, and everybody thought they needed to be heard more than the next person. And eventually *nobody* was heard, because the screaming just became laughably loud." Enter Eric Coble, who came to ATC in conjunction with their 2004 production of his play *Bright Ideas* and struck the theatre's leaders as the perfect partner for their farcical take on the situation. Coble accepted the commission and developed *Southern Rapture* over the next several years. It premiered to standing-room-only crowds at Actor's Theatre of Charlotte in April 2009.

Coble and Decker agreed that the new play required a balanced approach to the hot-button issues of free speech and the proper use of tax dollars, and indeed, Coble skewers all players equally in his fictionalized account. While at times it's thinly veiled, *Southern Rapture* is fiction. According to Coble, although he interviewed many people from both sides of the debate, he did not record his interviews so as to avoid quoting anyone verbatim, and he chose *not* to speak with the key players so he could imagine their characters more freely. And, lest audiences for *Southern Rapture* judge the citizens of Charlotte too harshly, Coble's *piece de resistance* is a scene of full frontal male nudity reminiscent of the hotly contested one in *Angels*. Thus *Southern Rapture* moves beyond the bounds of fact and history to take on a life of its own as the very thing it chronicles—a funny, moving, provocative piece of theatre that engages audiences in questions of free speech and censorship, public art and public funding—and of course whether or not to peek at the penis in the spotlight.

### **Stages Repertory Theatre**

Characterized by courage, generosity, ingenuity, and intimacy, Stages Repertory Theatre advances theatre and enlivens culture by producing new work, interpreting established work in new ways, and nurturing talent for the performing arts field. In addition to its MainStage season of plays, Stages presents the EarlyStages series, introducing young audiences to the power and magic of live theatre. Stages also offers a range of additional education and outreach programs that encourage conversation about important ideas and issues, provide insight into other cultures and viewpoints, and help develop each new generation of citizens, artists and audiences. Now entering its 31<sup>st</sup> season, Stages is a member of the Fresh Arts Coalition and a constituent of Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for not-for-profit theatres. Stages operates under an agreement with Actor's Equity Association (AEA), the union of professional actors and stage managers in the United States.

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## STAGES REPERTORY THEATRE FACT SHEET

**MAINSTAGE:** SOUTHERN RAPTURE  
By Eric Coble

Regional Premiere

Marjorie is a respected theatrical artistic director in a growing Southern city that has *almost* achieved "world class" status, that *might* host the upcoming Olympics...and that values tradition above all else. When Marjorie decides to produce an acclaimed but controversial new play, she sparks an increasingly outrageous culture war that divides the community and finally draws national attention--just not the good kind! Based on the true story of Charlotte Repertory Theatre's now infamous production of *Angels in America*, Eric Coble's latest work is a wickedly funny look at the intersection between artists and audiences, and the delicate contract theatres have with their communities.

**DIRECTOR:** Kenn McLaughlin

<b>CAST:</b>	Marjorie Winthrop	Sally Edmundson
	Winston Paxton	Rutherford Cravens
	Donald Sherman	David Wald
	Allissa, Nyla-Jean, Laverne, Candice	Pamela Vogel
	Dupree, Mickey, Anton	Jon Egging
	Simon, Emmett, GMA Host, Franklin	Jovan Jackson

<b>PRODUCTION:</b>	Scenic & Lighting Design	Kirk Markley
	Costume Design	Claremarie Verheyen
	Sound Design	Chris Bakos
	Properties Design	Jodi Bobrovsky
	Production Stage Manager	Julie Marie Paré

**DATES:** Previews: Wednesday, September 16<sup>th</sup> and Thursday, September 17<sup>th</sup>  
Opening: Friday, September 18<sup>th</sup>  
Close: Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup>

**TIMES:** Wednesday and Thursday: 7:30 p.m.  
Friday and Saturday: 8:00 p.m.  
Sunday: 3:00 p.m.

**TICKETS:** Regular: \$26 - \$36  
Previews: \$20 - \$25

**DISCOUNTS:** Students: \$20 advance, \$15 day of show with ID in person  
Seniors: \$20 - \$30  
Group Discounts available.

**BOX OFFICE:** 713.527.0123  
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Tickets available online at [www.stagestheatre.com](http://www.stagestheatre.com)

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