

ON THE TOWN

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Live Wire cast members (l-r) Pat Janowski, Mame Pelletier, Jonpaul McLellan, Tricia Ferguson and hostess Courtenay Hameister await their cues prior to their March performance at the Aladdin Theater.

Radio Daze

IT'S EARLY MARCH AT THE NORTH PORTLAND recording facility Mississippi Studios, and the cast of *Live Wire*, Portland's answer to *Prairie Home Companion*, is rehearsing a sketch for its next live radio show. Sean McGrath, playing the part of an overfriendly clerk in a co-op grocery store, accosts "intimidated shopper" Mame Pelletier, who stifles her giggles.

"Stop!" directs Kate Sokoloff, *Live Wire* co-producer. "We should totally get some supermarket Muzak under this one."

Ralph Huntley, a pianist and the leader of *Live Wire's* house band, the Mutton Chops, plunks out an appropriately vapid interpretation of "Girl From Ipanema," but co-producer Robyn Tenenbaum pops up from behind her computer to remind Sokoloff that the last time they did a supermarket sketch, the Muzak was too distracting. Sporadic bleeps from a checkout scanner are finally chosen as an appropriate audio backdrop.

LIVE WIRE

May 18 at 7 (doors open at 6)
Aladdin Theater
See p. 169 for details.

Sokoloff, a longtime artistic director in Portland's theater community, and Tenenbaum, a Bay Area transplant and a veteran of public radio broadcasting, put together the first episode of *Live Wire* in 2004. Since then audiences have filed once a month to the Aladdin Theater on SE Milwaukie Ave to hear hostess and head writer Courtenay Hameister kibitz with regional cultural and political celebrities—from bookstore owner Michael Powell to sex columnist Dan Savage—and to guffaw at the Northwest-centric humor of the eight-member cast known as Faces for Radio Theater. Performances by local musicians, from Linda Hornbuckle to Thomas Lauderdale, are also part of the mix.

Thanks to an arrangement with Oregon Public Broadcasting, the show reaches the airwaves in Oregon and Southwest Washington; via www.livewireradio.org,

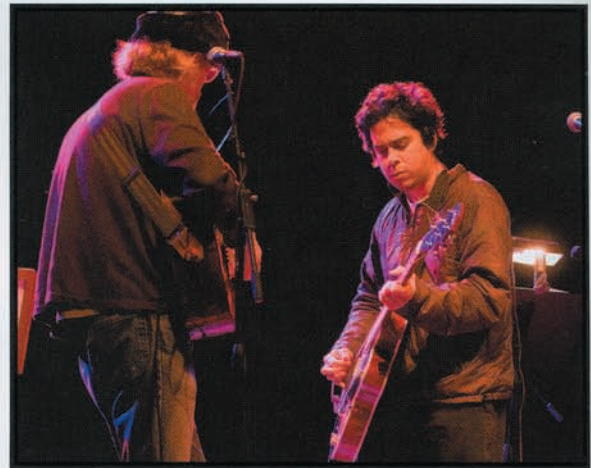
8,000-10,000, so our mantra has to be, "We're a radio show."

Mantra or no, it is apparent that the directors and the cast are enchanted with putting on a velvet-curtained, satin-draped, old-fashioned radio program.

"What makes a *Live Wire* interview different is the context in which it exists. There are theatrical trappings all around, and a packed house of people who are out to be pulled into the story, eavesdropping in on a conversation," Sokoloff explains. While gregarious types like Savage gleefully lap up the *Live Wire* spotlight, others, like Powell, raise an eyebrow at Hameister's casually self-effacing, sometimes offbeat interlocutory style. But the folksy atmosphere is ideal for drawing out lesser-known personalities like Saint Cupcake

defenseless watermelon. "We were all sitting around listening to her stab different melons—honeydew, cantaloupe—and the watermelon was the definite winner," Sokoloff laughs.

When it comes to showtime, these sorts of small touches matter. With an hour left before the taping of the March episode begins, the lobby of the Aladdin is buzzing as the eclectic house audience—a teenager with scruffy blue hair waits patiently in line next to a cardiganed elderly couple—arrives. Up in the greenroom, the mood is reminiscent of a junior high slumber party, as the members of Faces for Radio Theater crowd around a vintage suitcase that fluffs



Left: Cast member Tricia Ferguson cracks up at the March *Live Wire* show. Right: M. Ward (right) and Mike Coykendall shake a leg.

Up in the greenroom, the atmosphere is reminiscent of a junior high slumber party.

it reaches Podcast devotees all over the world. "I listened to a lot of public radio especially on the weekends, and I wasn't hearing things I was really enjoying. I wanted to listen to our show," Sokoloff explains.

It's not easy to create an episode each month that will appeal to both live and radio fans, says Tenenbaum, who hopes the show will eventually reach a national market. "We get really caught up in the costumes and the visual elements sometimes, but we have an in-house audience of about 500 and a radio audience of

owners Jami and Matthew Curl and for generating authentic—and sometimes wonderfully absurd—dialogue. "I feel a responsibility to the audience and to the people who come on the show," Hameister says. "We're introducing people to these minds and ideas, and I want to do right by them."

Meanwhile, sound effects artist Pat Janowski, aka the Siren of Sound, uses every tool in her arsenal to create a rich audioscape to support the actors. At the March rehearsal, Janowski simulated a stabbing by taking an ice pick to a

over with wildly patterned button-down shirts and polka-dot cocktail dresses. Janowski adds a sparkly brooch to her ruffled tank top as another cast member shouts, "Get me a mai tai! I'm not doing this sober!"

The guests—local musician M. Ward and the 20 pink-wigged members of the Dahoo Chorus, an eccentric a cappella group—cram into the small dressing room. Hameister arrives with trays overflowing with paprika-dusted deviled eggs and homemade crackers with salami. She slips her fishnet-stockinged feet into sultry, old-fashioned-radio-star heels as stage manager Mark Twohy calls places and Sokoloff and Tenenbaum take their posts at the base of the stage.

An infectious energy fills the theater as Tenenbaum, stopwatch in hand, counts "3 ... 2 ... 1." The mood in the room tangibly shifts; the audience realizes every noise, every giggle, every cough will be part of the radio broadcast. As the houselights dim slightly and the members of Faces for Radio Theater conclude their opening skit with the customary "It's ... it's ...," an enthusiastic audience responds with an adrenaline-pumped "LIVE WIRE!!!" —*Miranda Rake*