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## 'Frogz' hops into the hearts of Boston-area audiences

BY BOB HICKS  
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Call Imago Theatre's ticket line and you're told the company's taking the summer off.

Call Jerry Mouawad, co-artistic director of what just might be Portland's most interesting theater company, and you discover that doesn't mean anyone's hanging around the beach knocking back mai tains.

Baked beans, maybe. "Wacky, thoroughly enchanting ... sure-fire entertainment for all ages," glows the Boston Herald.

"Lighter-than-air skits ... that evoke smiles, giggles and even open-mouthed awe," says Daily Variety.

"That rare theatrical event family-friendly entertainment that is actually friendly to everyone in the family," says The Boston Globe.

All that Beantown enthusiasm is for "Frogz," Imago's calling-card show, which is in the midst of a sellout, held-over production at American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass., one of the country's top regional theaters.

"It's a big hit there. The Boston community really embraced it," Mouawad says.

Imago's expressionistic and extremely physical approach to theater,

which is based in the practices of the great French mime Jacques Lecoq, lends itself ideally to the kind of witty, child-delighting insights that distinguish "Frogz." But that's not the whole story. An Imago show can also come across as a sort of vaudeville of the abyss.

"Comedy allows you to take in the bleakness," says Mouawad, who's back in Portland for rehearsals of "Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen," a pair of Caryl Churchill plays due at Imago in the fall. As usual for Imago, it'll come with a twist: dancer/choreographers Mary Osland and Gregg Bielenmeier are working with Mouawad on it.

Meanwhile, Carol Triffle, Imago's other co-artistic director, is getting ready to start rehearsals for her own new play, "Hit Me in the Stomach," due to premiere next spring.

Triffle and Mouawad are also hustling up some new skits for "Brightlethings," Imago's second touring show, which like "Frogz," aims its wry physical comedy and slightly anthropomorphic costuming at a family audience.

"We're working on a ladies' purse that comes to life," he says. "We're also looking at something with a giant tube of toothpaste."

Call that a brush-up for Moua-

wad's return next month to Boston to begin rehearsals at American Repertory Theatre for a December production of his tilting, freewheeling adaptation of Jean Paul Sartre's "No Exit," which has played to applause three times in Portland.

And whirling around furiously in Mouawad's mind is "The Adding Machine," Elmer Rice's 1923 satiric comedy about lock-step society and the plodding little man, Mr. Zero, who keeps the books.

Mouawad's plans are big, if indefinite. He wants the show's set to be as groundbreaking as the tilting set for "No Exit," a precariously balanced stage that shifts up, down or to the side with every step an actor takes.

This time he's thinking concretely: "It's kind of like building a Ferris wheel," he says of his concept for a giant wheel that opens slowly as the set revolves, revealing a room at a time. The actors move through a maze as the wheel slowly spins.

Mouawad's already given preliminary sketches to technical whiz Dimitri Pavlatos, who has to figure out how to make it all work, and he's hoping to interest a consortium of regional theaters in splitting the production costs.

The links between family-friendly Imago and experimental Imago are a lot closer than most

people realize. "When I was directing 'No Exit,' I was surprised at how often I was referencing 'Frogz,'" Mouawad says.

Among the things he told his actors, whose first task was to overcome seasickness and get used to acting with their entire bodies as they rocked around on the tilting stage: "Economy of movement, sense of space, architecture, the ability to do the comedy in the work without doing anything more than necessary." In the Lecoq phrase, "the least for the most." That's how you reach the perfect place.