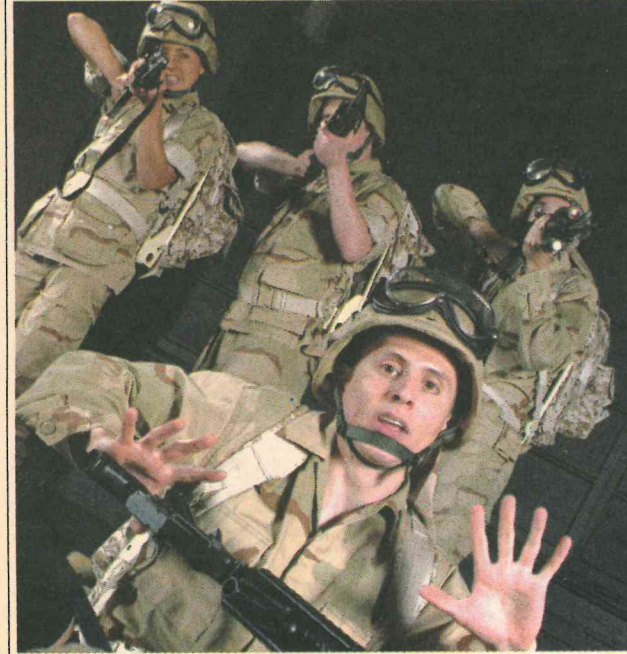
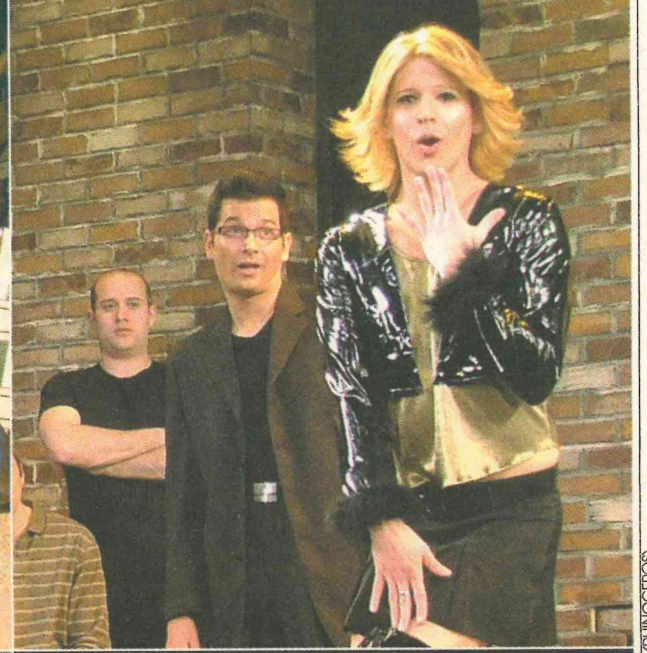
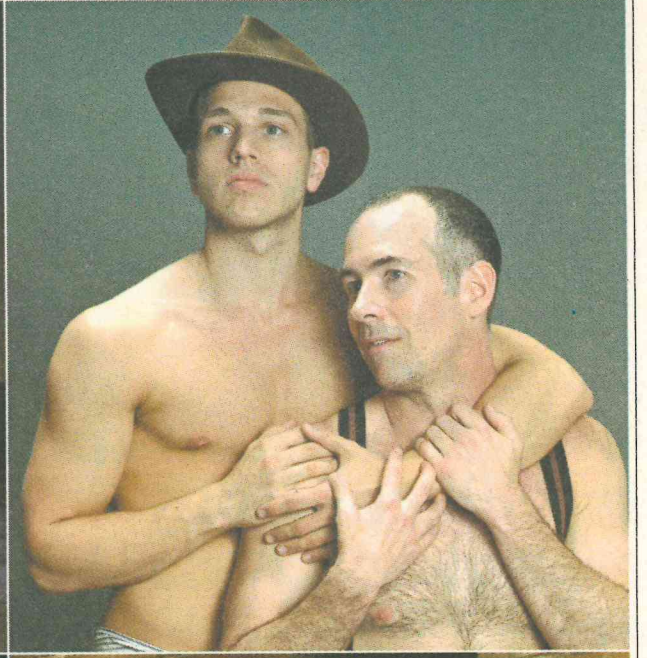
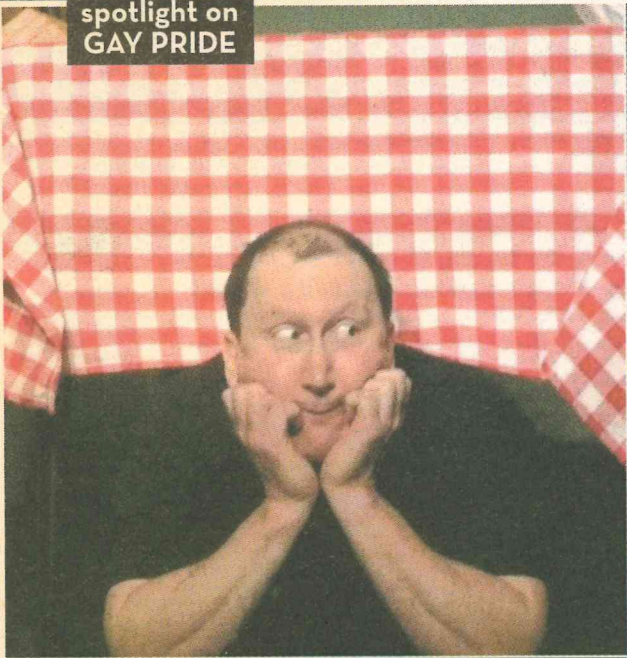


spotlight on
GAY PRIDE



COLLEEN SCRIBNER (WHO WANTS CAKE?); CRAIG BAILEY/PERSPECTIVE PHOTO (THEATRE OFFENSIVE); CAROL ROSSEG (WINGS); DAVID ELZER (CELEBRATION); DAVID ZAK (BAILWICK); KENT TAYLOR (RHINOCEROS)



IT'S QUEER, IT'S HERE, IT'S FOR EVERYONE

Across the country,
LGBT THEATRE
increasingly speaks
to a wider audience.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

LOOK AT THEATRE FARE ACROSS THE COUNTRY over the next two months: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender theatre is busting out all over. Well, of course. It's June, and that means Pride Month—the traditional time to celebrate all things queer and LGBT. Pride celebrations are now an international rite, with roots going back to the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969. But what happens the rest of the year? Back Stage spoke with several artistic directors responsible for running year-round, self-identified

LGBT/queer theatres or special series, and we got responses as diverse as the communities and cities from which they hail.

Still Speaking to the Community

Lesbian- and gay-identified theatre companies started springing up around the country in the 1970s and '80s, when there was little or no gay representation in mainstream culture. Some of these companies—notably San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros (founded in 1977), Celebration Theatre in Los Angeles (1982), and San Diego's Diversionary Theatre (1986)—are still around today; the granddaddy of them all, New York City's TOSOS (which stands for “the other side of silence”), founded by playwright Doric Wilson in 1974, went into hibernation in 1979 but re-emerged as TOSOS II in 2001. Since the mid-1990s, however, the issue of lack of representation has changed noticeably, as the landscape of mainstream culture has expanded to include the likes of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-, Tony-, and Emmy-winning *Angels in America* and Terrence McNally's commercial hit *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, as well as the numerous gay and lesbian characters featured regularly on network and cable television.

“Yes, you can't turn on the TV without getting gay characters—I get that from my dad and my aunts and uncles,” says David Zak, artistic director of Chicago's Bailiwick Repertory Theatre, with a laugh. So how does that affect Bailiwick's annual Pride Series, a fixture for the past two decades? “To be perfectly frank, as things get more and more mainstream, we always debate whether our Pride Series is necessary,” Zak acknowledges. “And every year we come back and say yes. There are still a lot of things to explore in the gay community in terms of our politics, and so many of the behaviors are either new to this generation or are the same behaviors that have been around in the community from the beginning.”

Dan Kirsch, executive and artistic director of Diversionary Theatre, echoes that thought. “We know that people come out every day and that it's still a journey that has to be taken,” he says. Kirsch points to Diversionary's upcoming production of Harvey Fierstein's landmark *Torch Song Trilogy*, slated for November. “Most people have only seen it as a movie,” he explains. “Even though it's 25 years after the Broadway production, it's still timely and contemporary, and it's important to share that culture and community memory, as it were, with our audience.” Diversionary's slate for next season also includes McNally's *Corpus Christi*. “We don't want to lose part of our culture because LGBT culture is being mainstreamed,” Kirsch says.

“As long as we exist and we have our own culture, there's going to be a need, especially in cities that are not as culturally diverse as, say, Los Angeles or New York,” observes Bill Kaiser, who for the past 15 years has performed a unique service by maintaining a national directory of LGBT/queer theatres and productions. His website, On the Purple Circuit (www.buddybuddy.com/pc.html), lists

From left, top row: Darryl Maharidge in *Fatal Attraction: A Greek Tragedy*, Who Wants Cake? Theatre, Ferndale, Mich.; Megumi Haggerty and Abria Smith in *Surviving the Nian*, Theater Offensive, Boston; Michael Lazar and Jason Alan Griffin in *The Jocker*, Wings Theatre, New York; second row: Chad Hetzel in *Fatal Attraction*; Amber Krzys and Mindy Sterling in *Gemini*, Celebration Theatre, Los Angeles; Ryan Lanning (far right) in *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, Bailiwick Repertory Theatre, Chicago; third row: Judy Tan, Gary Ng, and Hyunsoo Moon in *Surviving the Nian*; Haggerty and Smith in *Surviving the Nian*; Helen Sage Howard in *Special Forces*, Theatre Rhinoceros, San Francisco; bottom row: Helen Sage Howard, A.K. Conrad, Elias Escobedo, and Will Brown in *Special Forces*; the cast of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*; Joe Bailey in *Fatal Attraction*.

theatres across the country and provides valuable information for playwrights and producers. To Kaiser's point, we also found different approaches to gay theatre programming in the two major cultural capitals.

Reaching Beyond the Community

In Los Angeles, Celebration Theatre, which enters its 25th year this fall, has changed focus. Best known as a venue for long-running hits such as *Naked Boys Singing!* and the gay musical *Pinafore!*, Celebration will now present an annual season with a revised mission that embraces a larger audience, says Artistic Director Michael Matthews. "We don't want a theatre just for gay men and women," he explains. "We do plays with gay and lesbian themes, plays that should be able to connect with anybody." In New York, Artistic Director Mark Finley of TOSOS II says he looks for plays that reflect the author's individual voice rather than plays that are merely about being gay.

On the other hand, Jeffrey Corrick, artistic director of New York City's Wings Theatre (in existence since 1986), specifically targets a gay audience for his Gay Plays series. "Don't get me wrong: *Brokeback Mountain* and *Will & Grace* are great," he says. "But I think they're made for a straight audience and are skewed to reflect that. Theatre by gay people for gay people still has a real relevance."

Many long-running gay theatres have had to close their doors or reduce their output due to the drying up of funds, changes in audience habits, or sometimes just plain fatigue. Don Horn, who founded Triangle Productions in Portland, Ore., 15 years ago, has experienced a little of all of the above. "After a while, when you work full-time running a theatre and try to do 15 shows a year, you get burned out," he says. In 2005, Triangle lost its theatre space, where for 10 years the company had produced such gay landmark plays as *Angels in America*, *Jeffrey*, and *Bent*. Today, Triangle has to compete with larger, non-gay-identified institutions for similar plays. "We fought to do *I Am My Own Wife*," Horn says, "but because we don't have the huge box office, Portland Center Stage got that show." After a year's hiatus, Horn intends to keep Triangle going, with plans to produce a rock opera about Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan next February.

By contrast, Joe Bailey recently inaugurated the first season of *Who Wants Cake?* Theatre, a new LGBT company in Detroit. "Theatre in Detroit is not as large as it is in other metropolitan areas, so I thought it would be a really good area of opportunity," he says. He opened Del Shores' *Southern Baptist Sissies* in a new leased theatre in the suburb of Ferndale—home of Affirmations, Detroit's new LGBT center—to coincide with the city's Gay Pride Day at the beginning of June.

In San Francisco, Ed Decker, artistic and executive director of the New Conservatory Theatre Center, says that when he started the company's year-round Pride Season 13 years ago, "gay theatre was exclusively tailored to the gay community." He adds, "Of course, our work still speaks very keenly and specifically to the LGBT community, but it also opened up the dialogue for all communities to interact with our stories."

In the mid-'80s, AIDS was the urgent and even defining issue for most gay theatre. Diversionary Theatre, for instance, was established in response to the health crisis. And Bailiwick's first Pride Series, in 1988, was mainly focused on AIDS. The antidote to those dark days arrived some years later with the comedy *Party*, which began its highly successful run at Bailiwick. According to Zak, other cycles followed: "Boys-in-their-underwear plays, and porn-star plays, too, were the vogue for a while, but once you had all the video choices, there was no need to see your local guys running around unless the material was great." *Naked Boys Singing!* is still a hit around the country, and three years ago Bailiwick created its own version, *Barenaked Lads*, now in its third edition.

LGBT theatre fare is wide and varied. At Celebration, Matthews has chosen not to do plays that focus on nudity. "I ended up losing a lot of the audience," he says, "but then people started catching on to the artistic direction. His current offering is a 30th-anniversary production of the not specifically gay-themed *Gemini* by gay playwright Albert Innaurato. At NCTC, Decker has premiered new work by established gay authors—Terrence McNally's *Crucifixion* and Edmund White's *Terre Haute*. "We've become known as the place where these artists can come and flesh out new work on the West Coast," Decker says. Its current attraction is Richard Greenberg's Tony Award-winning *Take Me Out*. At Wings in New York, Corrick is interested in "plays that reflect a gay experience in other times and other cultures" and recently revived Clint Jeffries' *The Jockey*, a tale about gay hobos in 1931. Bailiwick's current offering is the U.S. premiere of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, which has a gay sensibility but is not part of the theatre's LGBT programming. Its Pride Series kicks off June 20 with *Dangerous*, an all-male adaptation (nudity included) of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by the London-based Shamelessboyz Theatre Company. Zak says he goes through some 200 unsolicited manuscripts every year; for the Pride Series, he is on the lookout for playwrights who are ahead of the curve in terms of gay-related issues. "We did our first gay-marriage play about 13 or 14 years ago, and that's been done to death now," he says.

Where Are the Lesbians?

The elephant in the room, of course, is work for and by lesbians. In all fairness, everyone seems acutely aware of this huge gap in their theatres' programming. Corrick says Wings' nearly 100 percent gay-male subscriptions have gone down

significantly whenever he has scheduled a lesbian-themed play: "At three different points in the last few years, we have specifically run a women's series, but we've had a hard time finding someone to be artistic director of that series." At Bailiwick, Zak says they've yet to figure out how to add the right lesbian work to the mix. "Gay men will go and see every musical ever written and have this whole continuum of gay plays," he says. Decker tried producing a program exclusively for women for five years, he reports: "First I thought it was because I was a guy running that program, and so I made it completely female-driven and female-curated, but the women just didn't feel comfortable coming here."

Apart from known economic disparities between the sexes, the identification of LGBT theatres as primarily gay-male venues is certainly a factor. Marian Jones has firsthand experience of this. In 1998 she started the Ivy Theatre in West Hollywood, Calif., after previously running a women's-works program at Celebration. She says she never had a problem getting audiences after founding her lesbian-identified theatre: "I had almost full houses every night for all the shows I produced at the Ivy." But the Ivy went dark when she left the state for two years. She has now revived it with a broader mission. "We're still producing lesbian playwrights, but I'm going to be producing a series of other cultural events—new music and art pieces—until I find a piece of theatre that I want to produce," Jones says. On the brighter side, she points to the independently produced lesbian musical *The Break Up Notebook*, which enjoyed a successful run in Los Angeles and is now scheduled for a co-production at Diversionary Theatre starting in July. Contrary to the trends, the theatre's Kirsch has also programmed a second lesbian-themed work, Zsa Zsa Gersick's *Blue Bonnet Court*, whose San Diego run begins next March. Celebration's next production, opening in July, is *Still Photos* by Vanda, a play about two women who fall in love with each other in the 1940s.

Works by women and lesbian playwrights and equally underproduced artists of color, however, are a staple at the Theater Offensive, a Boston-based company founded in 1989 to promote queer culture and politics. According to Artistic Director Abe Rybeck, the Theater Offensive's audience is almost 60 percent women, because the majority of its work is created by women. A recent production, the lesbian-themed musical *Surviving the Nian*, winner of a 2007 Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation Award, was written by Hong Kong-born Melissa Li, an alumna of the Theater Offensive's own True Colors: OutYouth Theater program. Rybeck is now developing *Shackles and Sugar*, a provocative new play by Letta Neely, a black lesbian playwright and poet. "A lot of theatres, when they look at her work, see risk and the challenges of getting an audience, as opposed to just the phenomenal writing," he says. "No one else is doing what she is doing."

Rybeck adds, "So many of the works that have had mainstream success have roots in alternative theatre—queer or experimental." He points out that before Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* was put together, the individual pieces were honed at small queer or alternative theatres. "We really need to open our minds further," he says. The Theater Offensive grew out of a gay men's guerrilla troupe, United Fruit Company, and its programs include *A Street Theater Named Desire*, which performs in gay cruising grounds to promote safe sex and AIDS education. The activist troupe plays to about 450 men between midnight and 3 a.m. each night in the summer. "That's more than we get into our little theatre," Rybeck says.

A New Approach for a New Century

In the first decade of the new century, many theatre companies are indeed opening their minds further and expanding their vision. The 30-year-old Theatre Rhinoceros has redefined itself as "radically queer," according to its artistic director, John Fisher. "There's a lot more fluidity in sexuality today, and our theatre embraces a broader spectrum of behavior." The San Francisco institution's current attraction is Fisher's own play *Special Forces*, which he describes as "a queer perspective on the Iraq war," featuring a drag queen who entertains the troops. Tim Cusack, co-artistic director (with Jason Jacobs) of New York City's Theatre Askew, also embraces the concept of queer in its broadest possible sense and says he'd like to move away from theatre that's based specifically in the gay community. Citing the antecedent of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Cusack says, "We're not interested in playing only to upper-class white gay men." He reports that at Theatre Askew's 2004 inaugural production, *Bald Diva!*, a queer adaptation of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, gay couples regularly walked out because the show was critical of gay marriage. Cusack was pleased that some found the work offensive. "If you get down to it, there's no such thing as normal, and everybody feels 'queer' in some way or another," he says. "The areas of slippage can be useful for creating theatre."

Theatre Askew's current production, *I Google Myself*, has a gay playwright, director, and company; the characters are men who have sex with other men but who do not define themselves as gay. "We're looking at different outsider perspectives and trying to build a critique of our own community from within it," Cusack explains. Thanks to the successful Off-Off-Broadway run of its previous show, an adaptation of the BBC miniseries *I, Claudius*, Theatre Askew discovered that its biggest audience is straight women in their 20s and 30s. "We want intelligent, artistically savvy, and politically aware audiences, and their sexuality is irrelevant to us," Cusack says. "It's not what's between their legs and what they do with it, but what's between their ears." <

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—David Zak, artistic director, Bailiwick Repertory Theatre

