

t h e a t e r

Grin and bare it

The off-Broadway hit *Naked Boys Singing!* offers audiences more than just eye candy **By Gerard Raymond**

“You’re here to see gratuitous nudity,” the eight naked performers of *Naked Boys Singing!* chant unabashedly in a full-frontal opening number, gleefully acknowledging the main draw of the show. The aptly titled musical revue—a collection of 16 nudity-themed songs presented with practically no costumes—has become an off-Broadway hit since its opening in New York last July. Popular with both gay and straight audiences (a choice for bachelorette parties and a favorite with Japanese female tourists), this show may signal a new development in the naked-boy revue—that much-scorned but always flourishing subgenre of gay theater.

Be it strippers in a burlesque show or Nicole Kidman in a high-toned Broadway play, nudity sells tickets. Robert Schrock, who conceived and directed *Naked Boys Singing!* while he was artistic director of the gay Los Angeles venue the Celebration Theater, is up-front about his motives. “We were losing our shirt at the time, so I decided we would drop our pants,” he says, laughing. “But it had to be a step up from plays where the stud is conveniently coming out of the shower when the doorbell rings. I wanted it to be accepted as a sophisticated musical comedy that happens to be naked.” Schrock’s brainchild has paid off handsomely—a 16-month run in L.A., the current New York success, and new Chicago and San Francisco productions in the works as well as offers from overseas.

While numbers like the au naturel paean “Nothin’ but the Radio On” or “Members Only,” a thesaurus for the word *penis*, can resonate with straight men, *Naked Boys* is primarily aimed at

Belting it out, sans belts

The men of *Naked Boys* had to prove their vocal chops at an audition before they were invited to strip.



JOAN MARCUS

a gay audience. “I think it’s really important to keep the gayness of the show,” says Schrock. The show’s one serious song, “Kris, Look What You’ve Missed” (with lyrics by Schrock) is a reverse strip number in which the performer, standing literally and emotionally naked, gets dressed while singing about how he has pulled himself together after his lover’s death. “I wanted to convey how I think the community is feeling now about AIDS,” says the 54-year-old writer-director. “There are a lot of us who are still here.”

Schrock—a member of the original cast of *The Dirtiest Show in Town*, the long-running gay-flavored off-Broadway revue that opened in 1970, a year after the heterosexual granddaddy of the genre, *Oh! Calcutta!*—explains that naked theater calls for specialized skills: “We try to choreograph so that all the anatomy goes in the same direction at the same time!” (New York theatergoers who pay \$20 extra to sit in the first two rows of the Actors’ Playhouse no doubt appreciate the artistry.)

Nevertheless, *Naked Boys Singing!* (like the recent gay comedy *Party*, in which the actors get naked after an elaborate game of truth or dare) distinguishes itself from its more raunchy brothers like *Making Porn* or *Jeff Stryker Does Hard Time* by diffusing all erotic tension. Even the number “Perky Little Porn Star,” in which a nice Jewish boy *kvells* over his rising fortunes in the adult film industry, is delivered with a cheery wholesomeness that undercuts the X-rated lyrics.

“People who haven’t seen the show give me crap for writing for the show,” says actor-songwriter David Pevsner, whose three contributions include “Perky Little Porn Star.” Having done his “naked time” in the original New York cast of *Party*, he recently made what he calls his “naked butt debut” playing a bartender in a gay bar in a new episode of TV’s *NYPD Blue*. “*Naked Boys Singing!* really is a charming and funny show,” Pevsner says. “I’m as proud of those dirty little songs as I am of anything I have ever done.” ■

Raymond is a freelance theater writer based in New York City.

You can learn more about Robert Schrock’s *Naked Boys Singing!* by visiting www.advocate.com