TORONTO'S PREMIER GAY LIFESTYLE DIGITAL MAGAZINE & MOBILE EDITION

MY GAY TORONTO

ISSUE #43

LOVE, SEX, BRAHMS, TYLER GLEDHILL AND A PUPPET NAMED SARKIS

BY PAUL BELLINI - BELLINI'S 8 1/2 PHOTOS BY: JOHN LAUENER

It's hard to get a beat on Love, Sex & Brahms, a dance show coming soon to the Betty Oliphant Theatre.

"It's a period piece. There's a puppet in it. It's based on waltzes written by Brahms. It features the legendary Evelyn Hart. It's more like little vignettes than a whole narrative." Such is the description offered by dancer Tyler Gledhill, who is part of the ensemble. I may have trouble piecing it all together in my head, but I must admit it sounds fascinating.

This much we know: legendary Canadian choreographer James Kudelka created a shorter version of the show which won a 2015 Dora Award for Best Choreography. This expanded version features such renowned dancers as Bill Coleman, Laurence Lemieux, and of course, Evelyn Hart. Solo piano duties will be handled by the virtuosic Andrew Burashko. And there's a puppet named Sarkis, who is the unifying element in the show.

This project brings together many talents. Kudelka is known for his mastery of classical and contemporary styles. Hart brings her classical training to a wholly different genre, giving audiences the opportunity to witness her dance to modern choreography. Coleman, who danced with Martha Graham's dance company, is the co-founder, along with Lemieux, of Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie. I asked Tyler if he was intimidated working with so many legends of dance.

"I was intimidated at first, but they are such kind people and so humble as artists that you forget about that. There's this thing about dancers, no matter how big a star you are, you maintain that humility." And no wonder. A dancer's life requires a lot of energy. "I've been dancing professionally for 15 years. I've do anywhere from 75 to 150 shows a year," he explains. "I'm physically active for at least six to eight hours a day, every day."

So does such a talented and handsome young man as Tyler Gledhill ever get to live the life of a bon vivant? "In my younger days I had more resilience, but if I know I have a performance coming up, I would not go out and party the night before. It's unproductive, unprofessional and yes, very painful." Hopefully, he'll at least be able to grab a drink at the wrap party.

So, dear reader, if you love dance, dance legends, Brahms, puppets or Tyler Gledhill, then Love, Sex & Brahms is definitely the show for you.

March 16 | 7pm: Opening Night Gala hosted by CLC Board Chair Stephen Delaney with a special introduction by James Kudelka

March 17-18, 2017 | 8pm ; March 19, 2017 | 4pm

The Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis Street, Toronto
$25 General Admission, $20 Artists, Students, Seniors, $100 Gala March 16 only
Box Office by phone: 416.364.8011 ext.1

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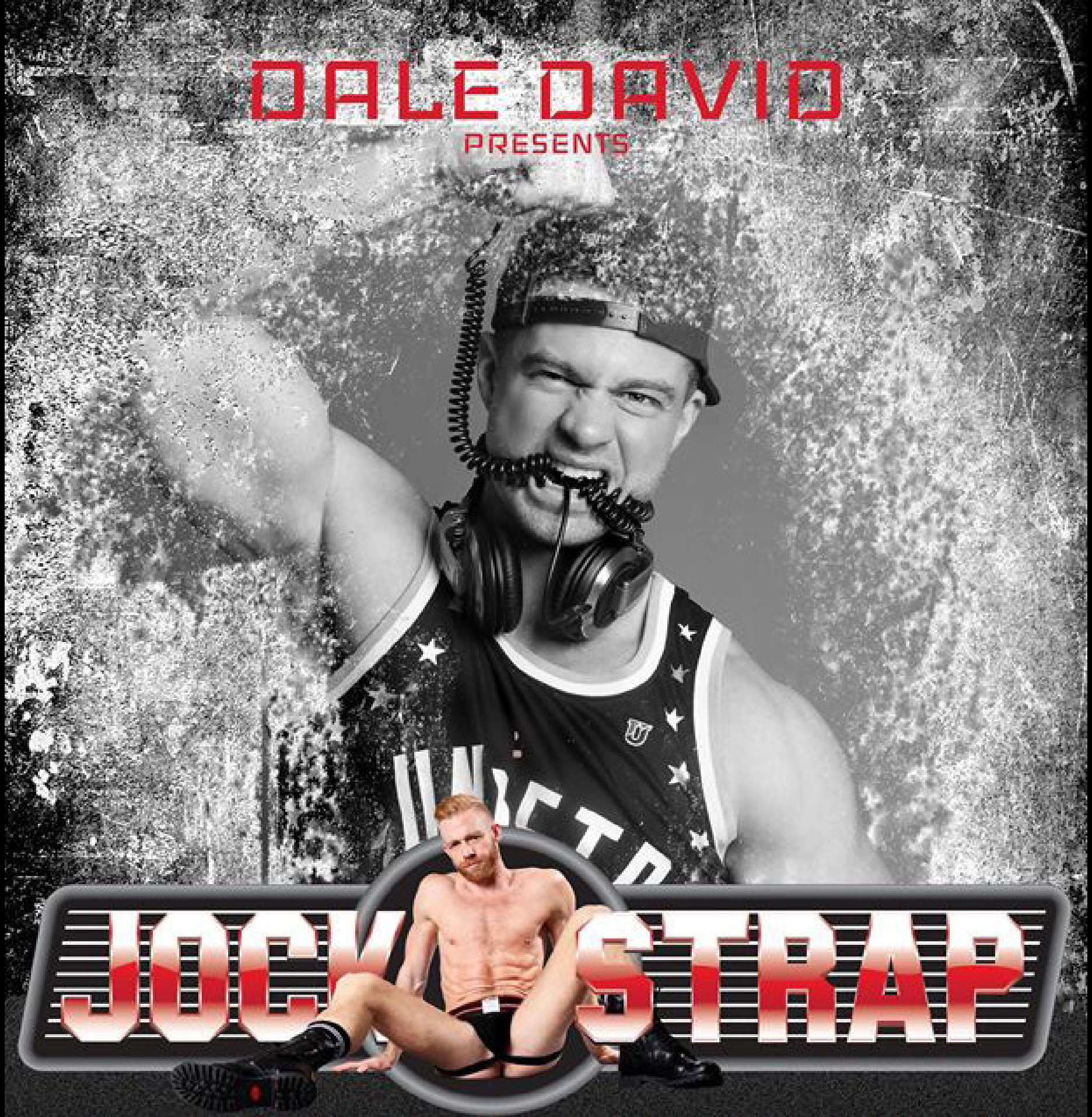
PRESENTS



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HEADSPACE: WALK A MILE IN HIS HEELS

BY RAYMOND HELKIO

To mark LGBT+ History Month, trans director Jake Graf releases his latest short film Headspace, an innovative account of the societal pressures that make life challenging for trans people. His previous films also deal with vulnerability and the search for meaning and acceptance, but this work uses inner monologues to illustrate how everyday situations like a visit to the doctor's office, the gym, the bathroom or navigating someone's perception of your gender can quickly become a battlefield fuelled by fear and misinformation.

https://vimeo.com/203887555

Intimate and authentic, Headspace is a touching exploration of what it means to boldly live life in an often unwelcoming world. The all-trans cast includes Laith Ashley from Whoopi Goldberg's trans reality show Strut, and trans activist and DJ Munroe Bergdorf.

Graf recently told the Huffington Post that "I think there is a popular misconception that once a trans person has medically transitioned, and settled into a 'mainstream' lifestyle, that all the struggles, challenges and discrimination simply fade away... I wanted to give a glimpse into some very personal and awkward experiences that are to some degree universal."

CIRKOPOLIS

BY SEAN LEBER

Having never seen any previous performances by Cirque Eloize, I did not know what to expect. I deliberately didn't do any research as I wanted to see the show without any expectations. The talented ensemble of 11 performers transform the classic film Metropolis into a virtuoso circus-dance performance, bringing the story to vivid life. Creative director and co-director Jeannot Painchaud envisions Cirkopolis as the crossroads between imagination and reality, individuality and community, and between limits and possibilities. The show is driven by the poetic impulse of life, the physical powers of the circus and the humor, at once serious and lighthearted. Entering Cirkopolis is all about letting go and allowing yourself to be borne aloft by hope.

The group delivers powerful performance throughout the show with one of the highlights being a pas de six with a woman and five men who are magical to watch. The show is definitely intended for a family audience and kids will be thrilled. Cirkopolis is similar in feel to Cirque du Soleil shows but stripped down with a smaller cast and without elaborate makeup and sparkly costumes. Also the affordable price of tickets that range from $39-$99 is a definite plus for a broad audience. As for the male performers, there are definitely a few hotties to look at, with few of but not enough of reveals.

Cirkopolis is enhanced by an original musical score and video projections, these performers live in a world where fantasy defies reality, where the veil of anonymity and solitude is lifted and replaced by bursts of humour and colour.

Cirkopolis runs until Sat, March 18 at the Bluma Appel Theatre, 27 Front St E. www.canadianstage.com

KNIVES IN THE BACK

BY PAUL BELLINI - BELLINI'S 8 1/2

I adore Michael Musto. The legendary New York gossip columnist dominated the '90s with his brilliant and witty Village Voice column, La Dolce Musto. Around 2005, thanks to David Hawe and Grant Ramsey, I was invited to a house party here in Toronto in which Musto was one of the guests. He, I and Nina Arsenault posed for pictures between cocktails. It was Musto who gave me the name of this column, Bellini's 8 1/2, which, like his, punned on a Fellini movie title

Later, Musto published two books, both compilations of his best columns. La Dolce Musto and Fork On the Left, Knife in the Back are laugh-out-loud funny. His wit and sharp eye make him a modern day Oscar Wilde. But it wasn't always rainbows and kittens. Recently, Musto wrote an article about all the shit he had to put up from "self-possessed lefties with narcissistic agendas" while at the Village Voice (http://ift.tt/2kcO541). Reading it, I couldn't help but sympathize. Once at fab magazine, I had an editor who corrected the spelling of a made-up word!

But by far the shittiest thing that ever happened was when, after 10 years and over 250 columns, I decided to follow in Musto's footsteps by publishing a compilation of my work. I called it The Fab Columns and released it in July 2012.Drew Rowsome wrote a lovely article about the book, which was set to run the week before my big book launch at Glad Day. I was under the impression that the then-publishers and editors of fab were proud of me. But when the issue came out, the article was not there. I fired off an e-mail to the editor, who told me they decided to push it to the next issue, as they had some leftover pictures of dumb hunks and drag queens from Pride that they still wanted to publish. I explained to him that if it appeared in the next issue, it would be moot, as the book launch would be over by then. They didn't give a fuck.

A year later, fab would be no more, killed by its own publisher. A few of the writers were invited to continue in the pages of Xtra (now also killed by the same publisher), though I was not among them. I was distraught. But then, like a knight in shining armour, My Gay Toronto came to the rescue, offering me a chance to write once more. I couldn't be happier, so long as they don't correct the spelling of made-up words.

La Dolce Musto ; Fork On the Left, Knife in the Back ; The Fab Columns

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BY RAYMOND HELKIO - RAY'S ANATOMY

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lu_9seklm-Q

"Maybe today younger kids expect something different, it's more open, but in the eighties and nineties, it was really hard because you had to lie. You had to lie to protect yourself. You had to lie to protect other people." –Bruno Billio, Canadian Installation Sculptor and Designer.

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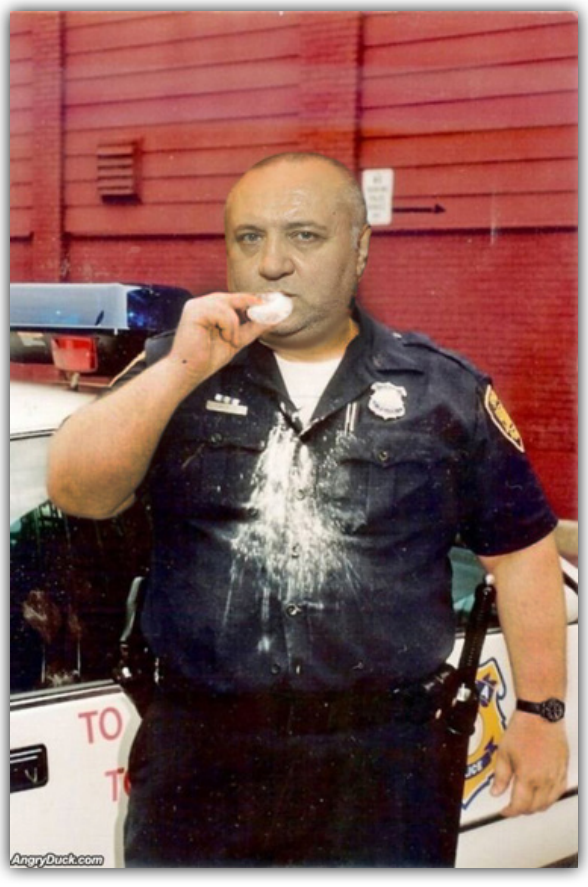
LUSTING AFTER A MAN IN UNIFORM

BY PAUL BELLINI - BELLINI'S 8 1/2

I'm having a bit of a dilemma these days. You see, I have a fetish. It is, to be sure, an unusual fetish. My fetish is to dress up like a cop for Pride Day.



I know what you're thinking. First, that's illegal. There are actual laws about impersonating a police officer, although that's half the fun, not getting caught. The costume store rents something that looks like a Toronto police uniform, but it's generic. It is meant for movie and TV shoots, not fetish play. But I have a feeling I'm not the only person who rents costumes for the purpose of fetish play. I knew a guy who liked to get blow jobs while dressed like Marie Antoinette and honey let me tell you, it is hot under all those crinolines. He was so deep into this annoying fetish that I declared I was going to bite his dick off, giving a whole new meaning to Marie Antoinette's saying, "Off with their heads."

Secondly, my timing couldn't be worse. A local activist group somehow managed to upend a million dollar parade with the help of a few lesbians who refuse to make clapping sounds. Well, it was bound to happen. These are the only people who have the patience to sit through Pride Committee meetings. They brought it to a vote and now it's a thing. Some people actually believe that banning uniformed cops at Pride will stop all the shootings and discrimination, which is a lot like hoping ice cream might help you lose weight.

So back to me and my adorable police uniform. Oh, how aroused I become thinking of how sexy I look dressed like one of those slobs who give out parking tickets. But I know if I show up in that outfit, someone will boo and hiss at me and call me names. (Don't you love when activists say they want to "start a conversation" about a contentious topic? It's always an entirely one-sided conversation, but whatever.)

Anyway, the costume shop just called to tell me that they're out of stock. Seems all their fat cop uniforms are already being used by the actual police force. Fine. I'll just have to go with my back up plan and wear a white sheet.

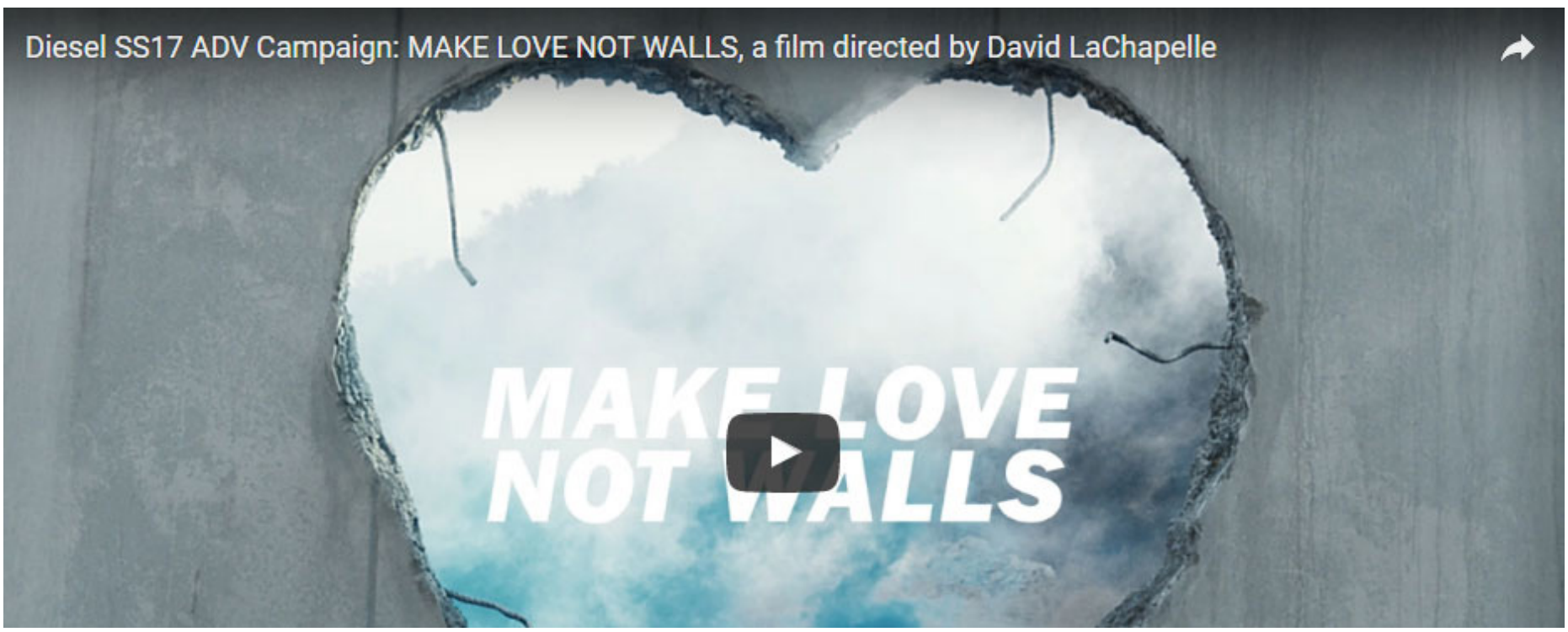
DIESEL S' 'MAKE LOVE NOT WALLS' CAMPAIGN

BY LEE FANCY

Amidst Donald Trump's deeply divisive US presidency, Diesel's Spring '17 campaign sends a message of hope, unity and acceptance. Starring in Diesel's latest is transgender model Laith Ashley, who appeared on Whoopi Goldberg's reality show Strut; Raja, a RuPaul's Drag Race season 3 alumnus; and many others just as fabulous.

Directed by iconic photographer David LaChapelle, the campaign features a gay wedding, diverse cameos and, naturally, a rainbow-colored tank. Nicola Formichetti, Diesel's creative director, states

"At Diesel, we have a strong position against hate and more than ever we want the world to know that. Love and togetherness is crucial in creating a society we all want to live in, and the future we all deserve." Check out the full campaign, below.



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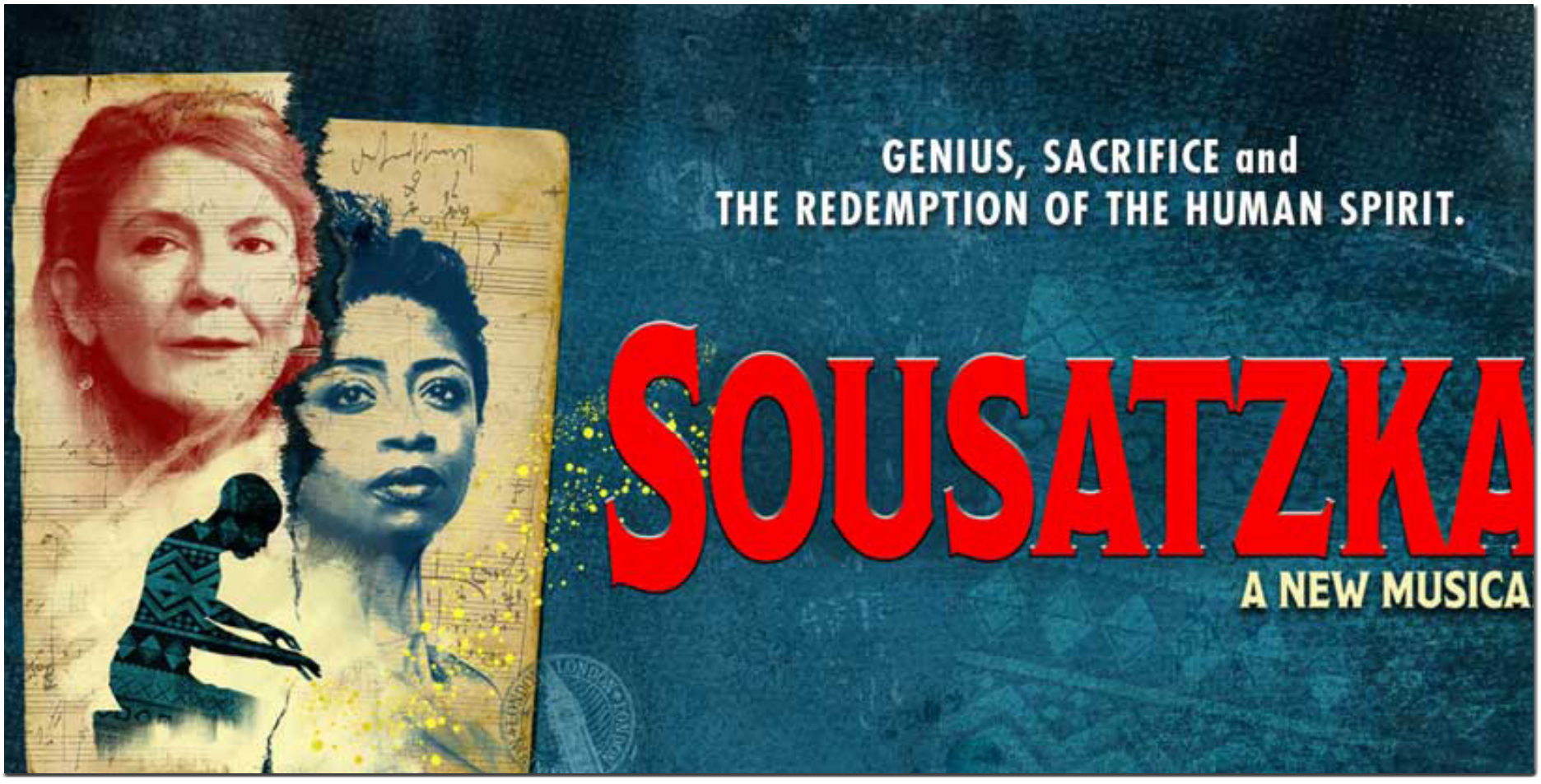
JAMES LEVESQUE: BOYS KEEP SWINGING IN MADAME SOUSATZKA

BY DREW ROWSOME



When you swing, being a triple-threat isn't enough. "Because I'm a swing in the show, it means I watch most of the time. Then I usually go to the rehearsal hall and physicalize it," says James Levesque of this role(s) in Madame Sousatzka. "It's one thing to see something, it's another to do it. There are scenes where all six of the people I'm covering are onstage and I have to be able to sort each of them out. And getting your head around that is a bit overwhelming. So I'll go through one and then I'll do another person's part."

Overwhelming but a dream come true. "When I was 12 or 13, I saw a documentary on the CBC about Garth Drabinsky renovating the Pantages for Phantom. I remember thinking 'That's what I want to do, I want to go to Toronto and do that kind of show.' That might also have been the first year that I saw the Tony Awards on TV. I suddenly had an awareness that there was something beyond what I had grown up with."

Instead of a lurking mystical phantom, Levesque landed a gig that resonates personally. "The relationship between Madame Sousatzka, the piano teacher, and her student, he's come from South Africa and he's a prodigy, reminds me of the relationship with my first singing teacher growing up in Calgary. I didn't just learn about music, I learned about art, and poetry, and she taught me to make risotto. She introduced me to a world I didn't know was out there.

I realized I could be different from my family and that's ok. She helped me become myself. I started classes when I was 17 and in a way she helped me come out of the closet. She was telling me that if I was hiding something in my life, then when I got up onstage I'd always be hiding. Even if you're going to be somebody else, if you're constantly hiding a part of yourself, you can only go so far. That was a big thing for me. Until I came to terms with who I was, until I was honest, I couldn't really get up onstage and let myself be vulnerable, expose everything."

And not just personally, Madame Sousatzka grows more culturally pertinent by the hour. "Because of what's going on in the world right now it just seems more relevant," says Levesque. "The main characters are all refugees who fled different countries in the early '80s and wound up in London. What it's like to be forced out of your home and you're trying to find out where you fit in the new world but you want to hang on to who you were. I've never been in a show like this. I'm part of it so it's hard to be objective but I was in the workshop we did this summer, I was in the ensemble, and I had the opportunity for my agent and a couple of friends to come. The response we got from people was pretty overwhelming. It's a very moving show."

The book writer, Craig Lucas, is known for his gay-themed masterpieces Prelude to a Kiss and Longtime Companion, so it is not too much to hope for some gay content in Madame Sousatzka. "There is a character who is, I think it's pretty explicit that he's gay," says Levesque. "He grew up in England through the '60s, when it was still illegal to be gay. There's one scene where he explains the situation and, it's not like he says 'I'm gay,' but you understand that he is. I'm not understudying that role, there's two caucasian principal roles and he's older, he's in his '60s, so he's played by an older actor."

There is also a major song entitled “Rainbow Nation,” that reflects the teamwork that has gone into Madame Sousatzka. “Composer David Shire has also written a lot of film scores,” says Levesque. “He can sit at the piano and play jazz and just orchestrate a beautiful thing that is cinematic. They started out with just that but they’ve added pop stuff and South African arrangements that are done by Lebo M who wrote the South African bits in The Lion King. He came in this summer and he would take what David and Richard Maltby Jr the lyricist had written, and he would get us to improvise on top of it. So it blended into the music, it was quite a process, I’ve never experienced anything like that. There’s such a depth that it brings you to another world. The whole show is about merging worlds. When you start integrating these things, that’s when the magic happens. Music brings us together so instead of saying that’s different from who I am so I’m not interested, let’s bring all the special things we have to offer and create together.”

There are high hopes for Madame Sousatzka to transfer to Broadway after its Toronto run. For a boy who first saw the televised Tony Awards while in remote Calgary it is an exciting prospect. “Not that I had thought that was in the cards for me necessarily but the fact that this has the potential to go to New York is really exciting. It’s the same dream I had as a kid, a Broadway show is a big dream. And it leads to the opportunity to do other things. My partner and I had started the process of getting work visas to go to LA and try our luck down there. He’s a photographer and he has some clients down there but you kind of have to be there to really establish yourself. And who doesn’t want to live near to a beach?”
More from James Levesque at drewrowsome.blogspot.com

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THE SASSY SIDE OF SIRI

BY RAYMOND HELKIO - RAY'S ANATOMY

She's a singer, voice actor and public speaker, but you most likely know Susan Bennett as the original voice of Siri, the built-in "intelligent assistant" that made it's first appearance in the iPhone 4S. Short for Speech Interpretation and Recognition Interface, Siri uses artificial intelligence to respond to questions in a way that sounds natural and almost life-like.

Before Steve Jobs had introduced the iPhone, Bennett had been recording her voice for a third party text-to-speech company that Apple would ultimately purchase all of their voices from. She worked fours hours a day for a month on a speech programming process called 'concatenation.' Bennett explains that "The recordings that ultimately became Siri were done to get all of the sound combinations in the language. I read thousands of phrases and sentences that were created for sound rather than content. Afterwards, technicians and computers went into the recordings, extracted sounds, and reformed them into new phrases and sentences. These became Siri's and other virtual assistants' responses on our devices. The first concatenated voices sounded really robotic and unnatural and that's why the original Siri was so iconic: She was the first concatenated voice to sound human, and you could interact with her. Now, with each iteration of Siri, the voice is more and more natural, which is the result of improvements in technology."

Siri is made even more life-like by the added sassiness which is partly due to the writers Apple hired to create cheeky responses to some common, often provocative, questions. And then there are those times when a Siri answer seems to border on snarky which as Susan explains to Time Magazine, “There are some people that can read hour upon hour . . . I get extremely bored . . . That’s one of the reasons why Siri might sometimes sound like she has a bit of an attitude. Those sounds might have been recorded the last 15 minutes of those four hours.”

How would you say the Voice Over (VO) industry has changed over the past decade?

The VO business has been completely revolutionized by technology over the past decade. Even the way talent are hired has changed. In the past, most work was union, so the talent were paid fairly, and they had a union agent who kept an eye on things. They auditioned through the agent so there was a real structure in place. With the internet came lots of VO production companies, that had access to a lot of non-union work; and with technology came home recording studios, so talent began working at home, directly with the production companies, or directly with the client through their own companies.

In the past, VO was kind of a mysterious thing. People in the business, or people in related businesses like acting, music, jingle singing, etc, knew about it, but most people didn’t. That changed with movies like In a World, and the fact that VO was talked about a lot on the internet and social media. The result is that there are now thousands of people out there competing for voice work, which makes it more difficult than in the past. The voice actor has to be his/her own agent, marketer, accountant, engineer, and talent. There’s a lot of opportunity, but the talent can no longer just get by on reading copy.

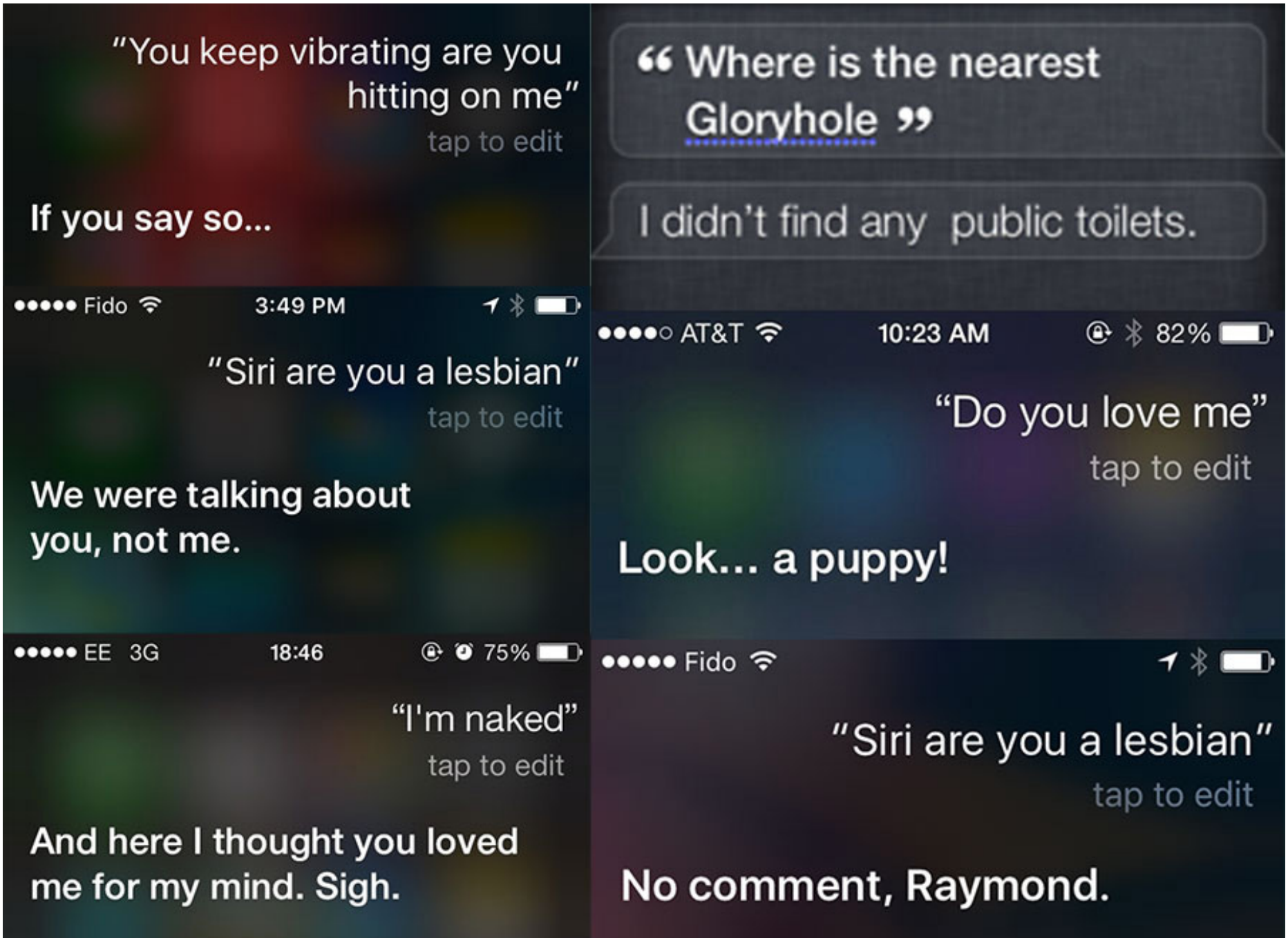
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-8KDyB3BFQ

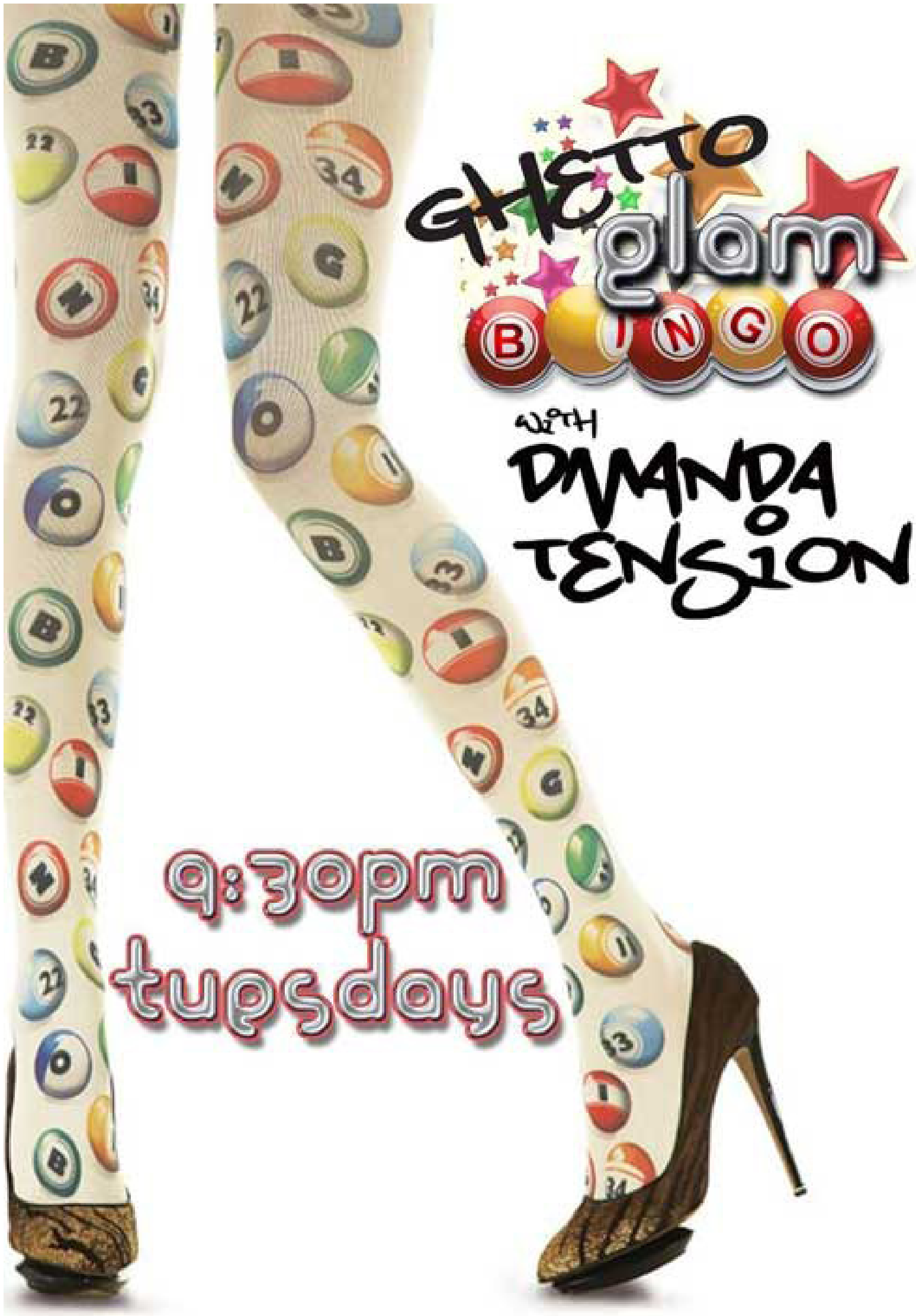
What's the most significant thing that changed in your life after discovering you were the voice of Siri?

The fact that I was the original voice of Siri! It had a lot of repercussions on my career and it took me many months to get used to it. However, it ended up becoming a very interesting part of my life and I've begun a new career because of it; doing speaker events in which I talk about Siri, the VO business, and how it all affected me.

Touring with Burt Bacharach or Roy Orbison, which was the richer creative experience for you and why?

That's a very difficult question to answer, because the two experiences were very different. I only toured with Burt for a few weeks but it made a huge impact. I got to sing with him surrounded by a full orchestra, so it was incredible, musically. I toured for two years with Roy and his five piece band, plus two other singers. My first gig was in Bulgaria televised to ten million people. I made some very good friends on that tour, and I also got to sing a duet with Roy, playing the Emmy Lou Harris part in "That Loving You Feeling Again" so it was an important part of my life, both musically and personally.





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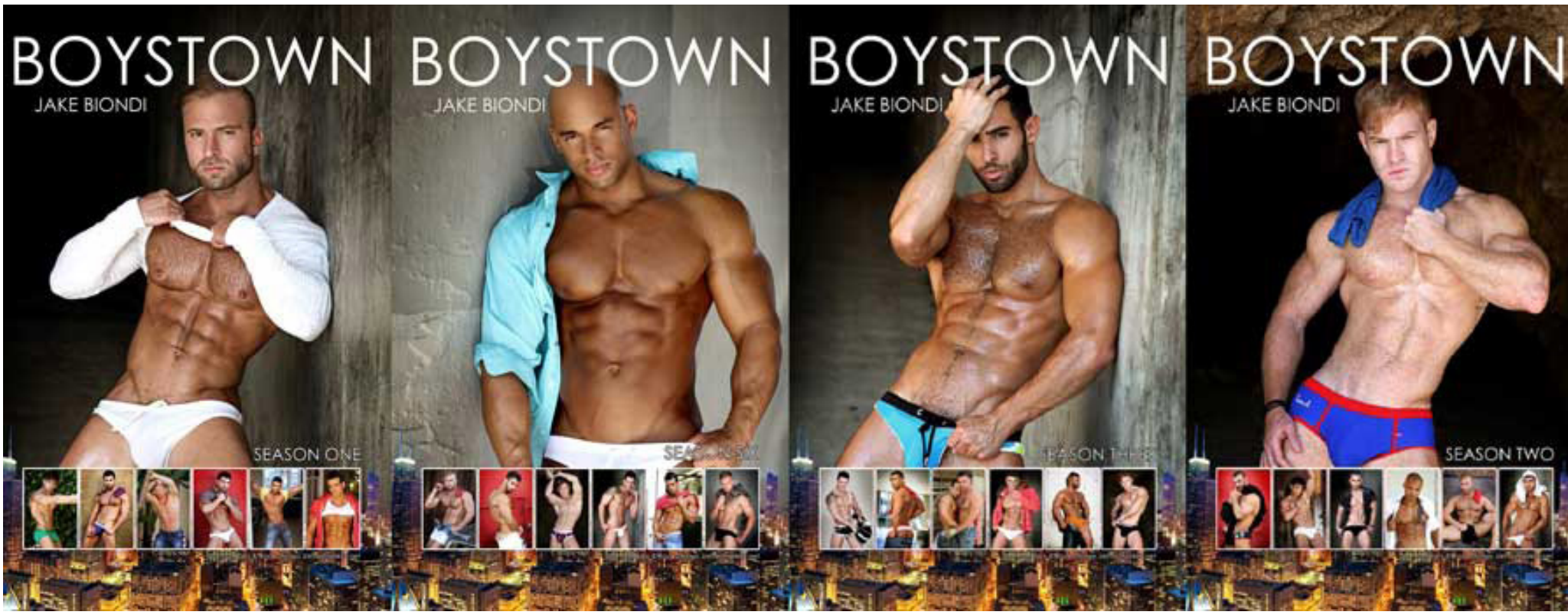
BOYSTOWN:
SUDS AND STUDS IN A LITERARY ESCAPADE

BY DREW ROWSOME ★★★½☆



The original impetus for entering Boystown was the press release announcing the introduction of a transgendered character into the sixth book or, as Boystown calls it, "Season Six." My plan was to skim Boystown Season One and then skip ahead to Boystown Season Six to glean the newsworthy bits. The best laid plans . . .

The Boystown series began as monthly episodes released online, each ending in a cliffhanger. Author Jake Biondi cites Charles Dickens as inspiration but, owning a marketing as well as a literature degree, he freely admits that Dynasty, Knots Landing, Dallas and Revenge were/are influences. Not knowing either of those tidbits when diving into Boystown Season One, I came up with my own theory of influences: Boystown is like the unholy love child of Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City and Passions.

Tales of the City was a life-changing series of novels for me and, I suspect, many who read them close to the time they were published. The plots were intricate, unabashedly romantic and human, but the Tales were also unapologetically gay (and featured, to my knowledge, the first trans character who was defined by her personality and heart instead of shock value). For the first time, in my experience, I was reading about my life and my issues affecting characters in a very specific milieu that made them universal. Gay, and more importantly gay sex, were just a fact of life, a given, and the Tales were tales that reflected that.

The characters in Boystown are even less concerned with gay as a source of angst or agony. Their problems are all of the romantic - with the occasional murder, blackmail, act of revenge, etc thrown in - variety. Love rules in Boystown. Characters switch partners at a dizzying rate, but each time it is true love, true love with that traditional trope of marriage as the reward (rings, engagement and wedding, are a constant as plot devices and a thematic overlay). The exchanging of hearts is made easier by the vague differentiation between the characters: there is not a lot of descriptive help - one character is defined by the fact that he appears to be the only one with a sprinkling of chest hair - and I frequently found myself flipping back trying to remember just who someone was.

All the characters are originally defined by their initial relationships and then are re-defined in terms of the next, and the one after that, relationship. A proportion of the characters are stated to be black, but like homophobia, job insecurity and weight gain other than muscle, race does not appear to be an issue or of any concern. But does that matter when the characters are mainly beauties to be moved about on the page and set into mortal peril for our amusement?

A good soap opera, and I still give Passions the top prize for its supernatural and camp elements, is about power, family and the ecstasy of true love and great sex. The plots are crazily convoluted and the cliffhangers are constant, as teasingly blatant as a slot machine. Twins, previously unknown bastard children, adultery, misunderstandings, party planning, dark secrets and sordid revelations are all standard plot devices. Boystown has all of them. On steroids. When the vaguely mafioso family - rich and powerful vineyard owners with handsome oversexed twin brothers and a seething need for revenge for a past sexual indiscretion - first appeared, I laughed out loud. But I laughed with sheer glee.

I didn't skim Boystown Season One, I read it all the way through. And instead of skipping to Boystown Season Six, I immediately started Boystown Season Two. I had to find out who lived and who died in the shootout after the kidnapping and rapes.
That is a recommendation.

Given three days on a beach and I would be clamouring for Boystown Season Seven.
The marketing of the Boystown series is as clever as the ever expanding plotlines which frequently achieve the level of farce with near misses and barely avoided collisions a constant. Biondi has teamed up with photographer James Franklin to create covers featuring air-brushed near-naked gay porn stars. They are undeniably eye-catching and enticing. But, like porn stars, Boystown is unrealistic. All of the characters are good-looking with chests that are either hard, muscular or tight. They all appear to be versatile, masculine, well hung and cum explosively after a few thrusts. The sex scenes, one every few pages, are a little rote and when there is a novel twist - a domination scene involving condom juggling is very memorable - it stands out. Like the cover models, the sex in Boystown is hard core-lite, titillating but too stylized to inspire jerking off.

I don't for a minute think that Biondi is trying to reflect reality or plumb the depths of the human, or the gay, condition. Dickens wasn't writing literature, he was too busy making a living and being as entertaining as possible. Value judgments will have to be left for scholars in the future. Call me shallow but sometimes a little fantasy - Chicago should give Biondi, the tourist board must love him, a medal for his depiction of the city's famed Boystown - is a good thing. And it is certainly a highly entertaining and addictive one.
The six seasons of Boystown are available in multiple formats (digital downloads, audio, print) and editions. And there are plans for a TV series. :)

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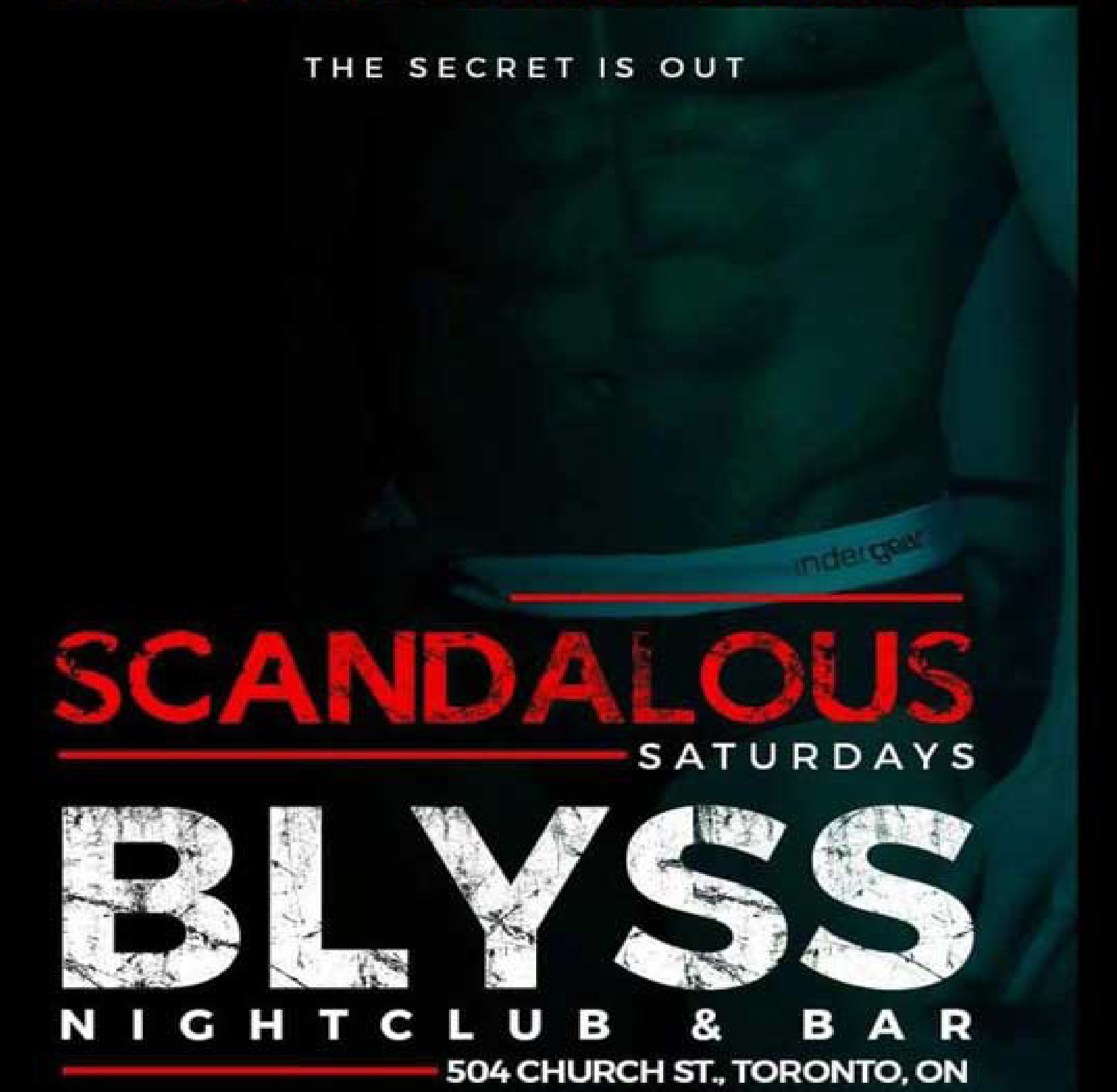

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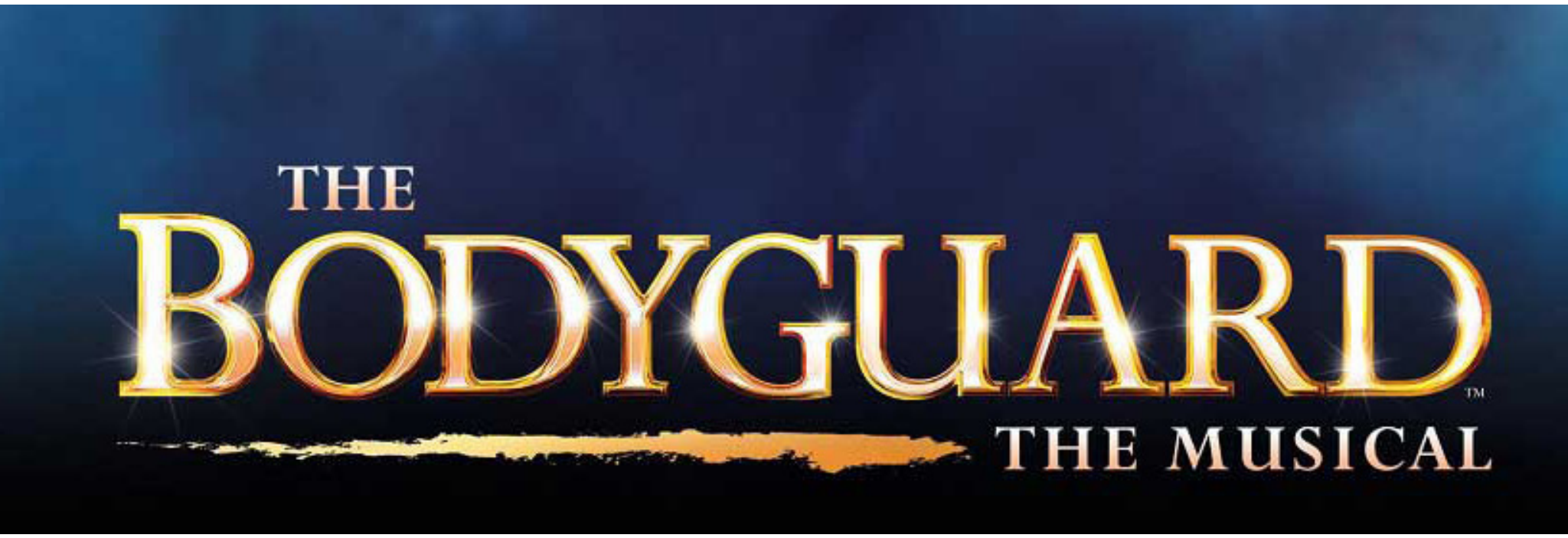
THE BODYGUARD: FLASH, CAMP, SPECTACULAR SINGING, A SEXY STALKER AND CHORUS BOYS GALORE

BY DREW ROWSOME - ★★★★½ PHOTOS BY PAUL COULTAS



The Bodyguard begins with a literal bang. Attention guaranteed, there is a snippet of non-sensical plot information before launching into a frenzied and fabulous musical numbers. The astounding Beverley Knight is surrounded by distractingly stunning chorus boys, all undulating abs and glass-cutting nipples executing heart-stopping choreography while the beat pounds and blinding lights flash. It would throw Sofonda into paroxysms of jealousy.

It threw the audience into sheer ecstasy. And kept them there. The plot remains non-sensical - and mostly incomprehensible - but the music is glorious. And every time there needs to be another magnificent set change, Beverley Knight as Rachel Marron pop superstar, steps out front and unleashes her voice and the audience is salivating. Everything, except the ballads which are a wonderful wallow, moves quickly which is just as well because trying to puzzle out what is happening is pointless.

For some reason Stuart Reid, the bodyguard or rather The Bodyguard, decides to work with a pop superstar who is being menaced by The Stalker. For some reason The Stalker is obsessed with the pop superstar and sneaks into her dressing room to leave a threatening note and steal a dress. For some reason, for which we will forever be grateful, he does not wear the dress: The Stalker is shirtless for most of the first act and Matthew Stathers' muscled torso is a special effect that outdoes all the explosions, bright lights, shooting flames and even most of the high notes.

For some reason the pop superstar and The Bodyguard, who loathe each other on sight, fall into bed and into love. For some reason there is a love triangle featuring the pop star's sister, or it just may be an excuse to give Rachel John, whose voice is also astounding, a chance to spell Knight. For some reason The Stalker finds them all in a remote cabin in the woods and at the Academy Awards. For some reason he is shot and for some reason true love does not prevail. There are massive projections that ostensibly provide exposition, but mostly they emphasize the production's tendency to dive headfirst into glorious spectacular camp. There are moments that are so jaw-droppingly, giddily atrocious that they are beyond fabulous.

The pattern of bits of melodramatic plot followed by either a full-scale number or a power ballad, works astonishingly well. And the excess, leading to camp, is perfectly fitting for an over-sized pop superstar and The Bodyguard becomes an extremely satisfying whole. It is only afterwards that one is utterly confused as to why Knight sings - in a staging ripped off from Cats which Knight has also starred in - "I Will Always Love You" when it should, logically, have been Reid's character. No matter, it is the big 11 o'clock number and Knight sells it to the stratosphere. And it is followed by disco balls, confetti cannons, and "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" sung by the entire cast and the entire audience.

Everyone left elated and in a state of euphoria. While it may be a jumble, The Bodyguard has everything one could want from a musical: hooky songs, incredible sets, jump scares, a love story, a child actor who manages to charm (Jaden Oshenye at the performance I saw), a comic karaoke sequence that Reid knocks out of the park, and, it must be repeated, chorus boys (kudos to Raul Naranjo Garcia, Christopher Jeffers, Elliot Powell, Pablo Ceresuela Torres, Matthew Wesley, Michael Wade-Peters and Mark Willshire) who even in their more sedate costumes keep bursting out of their shirts.

Amidst all the flash, trash and Whitney Houston hits - all sung with more passion than poor Whitney, rest her lack of soul, could ever muster - there is a magical moment that stands out. Knight sings in a recording booth, expressing her inexplicable love for the handsome but stolid Reid. She is dressed down, the pop superstar is clad dowdily off-stage but Knight shines through it, and only visible from the waist up. And she sings the shit out of “All The Man I Need.” And in that moment The Bodyguard transcends any need to tether itself to any form of reality, logic or even its vaguely film noir style. It is just to be accepted, enjoyed and revelled in.

Noel Coward said, “Strange how potent cheap music is.” The Bodyguard music is a grade above cheap - Houston could afford the best pop songwriters there are - and the packaging is slick and glossy even if irresistibly incoherent. Coward, and Sofonda, hell anybody including this cynical non-Houston fan, would love it.

-The Bodyguard continues until Sun, April 9 at the Ed Mirvish Theatre, 244 Victoria St. mirvish.com

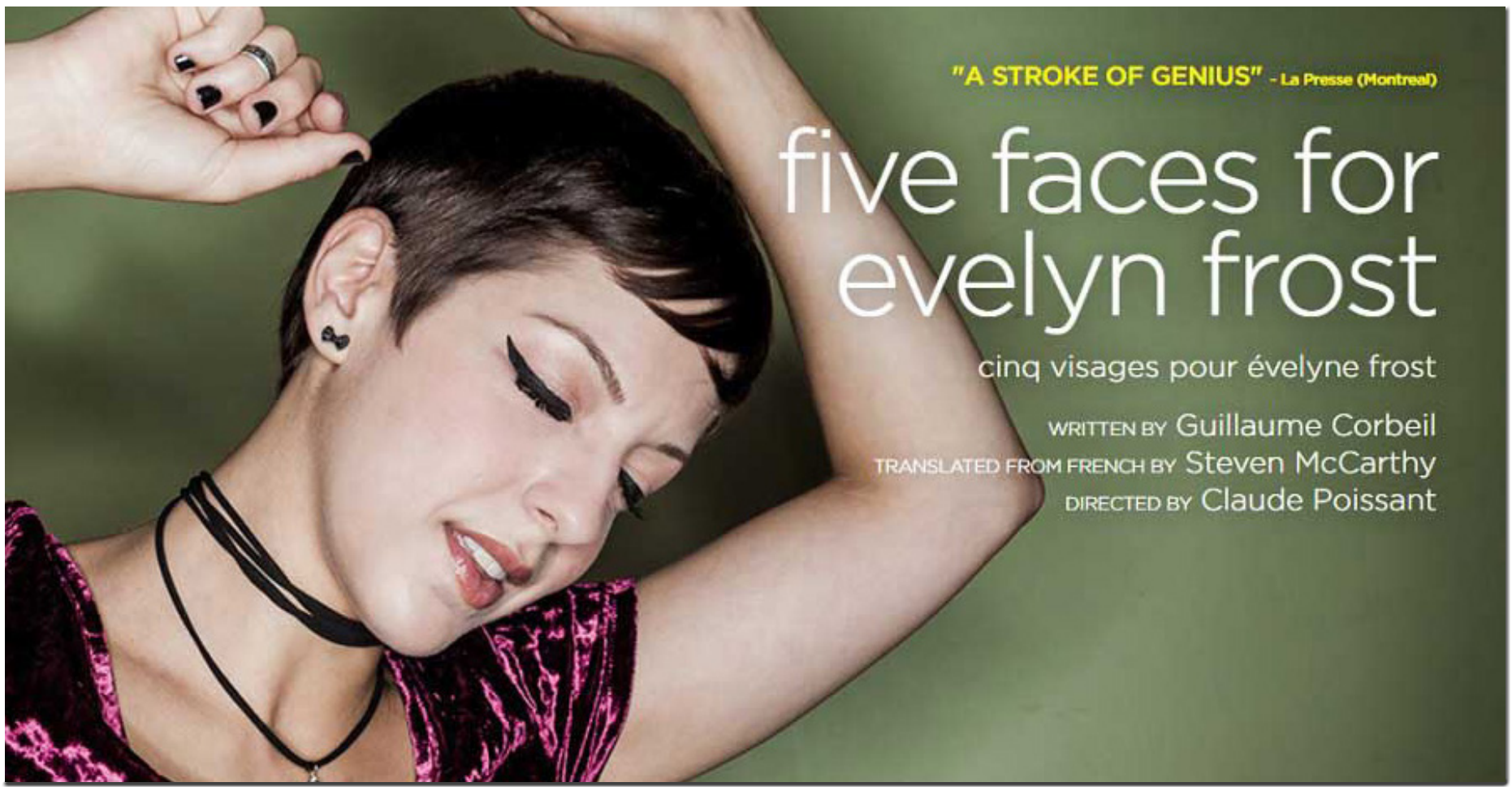
FIVE FACES FOR EVELYN FROST: AN EMPHATIC "LIKE"

BY DREW ROWSOME - ★★★★½ PHOTOS BY CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

Five amiable, apparently clean-cut 20somethings line the front of the stage and, being dedicated to self-revelation, thank the audience for coming and then recite the contents of their social media profiles. Their height, eye and hair colour, fashion choices, and ambiguous personal details are stated in a humorous slightly competitive manner. They then begin citing musical preferences and Five Faces for Evelyn Frost takes flight.

What begins as character-defining - what could be more personal and revealing than one's musical tastes? - quickly becomes a nasty game of one-upmanship. Guilty pleasures, obscurities and pretentious connections battle it out for who is the most interesting character. The names fly out faster and faster until the voices become musical themselves, a rhythmic spoken word symphony. It is very funny and very familiar, perhaps too familiar, we've all played that game.

From music to celebrities known, to parties attended, to books read, to criminal activities, to debasing sexual acts, to reasons to be pitied, the five compete for supremacy and attention. And it is quickly revealed that they don't always tell the truth and that the actual truth is flexible if not unknown. The more they try to define themselves, or the image they want to project in that instant, the more disconnected they become from any sense of self or reality.



Playwright Guillaume Corbeil has a point to make about social media's affect on us. And he makes it clearly and concisely very quickly. From there, Five Faces for Evelyn Frost is a one-trick pony of a s how but it is a very good trick that bears repeating, his choice is to go darker and deeper into some very horrific and comedic places. He is ably assisted by a clever production that makes good use of projections, simple props, constant visual distraction and a cast that manages to be appealing while playing characters who are playing at being blasé and full of ennui. The twist, or illogical logical extension, towards the very end is finely pitched to make the audience choke on their laughter and then laugh again.

The cast is truly an ensemble and they are compelling as a unit and as the cogs that make up the group. Whether just speaking foward, executing the split second timing that turns the words into musical poetry, or executing simple but effective choreography, they project an outer calm that contrasts with the rapidly escalating internal panic. It is facades within facades that they deserve credit for turning into credible everyman individuals. Steffi Didomenicantonio the status-conscious party girl, Tara Nicodemo the intenser and more sexual party girl, and Laurence Dauphinais the pseudo-hippie are all stereotypes that through charm and subtlety become well-rounded, deliberately over-rounded, characters.

Who each member of the audience identifies with will depend on our own myths and aspirations of social placement. For me there was an urge to see myself in Alex Weiner's sexy but shallow post-frat boy, but I winced many times when I saw myself in Nico Racicot's pompous sexually-fluid wannabe artiste snob. They are all very good and there were many moments when little electric gasps of nervous laughter sparked through the audience as, one by one, we flinched in recognition. It is a very contemporary flinch, and there is only one section where the projections attempt to link social media behaviour and its affect to historical antecedents. But, with updates every few months of the references and technological changes, Five Faces for Evelyn Frost will remain as relevant as it is right this instant. That is a horrifying and sad thought.

As the audience filed out, it was almost impossible, out of habit or need, not to resist checking our phones. Throughout the theatre and lobby hands reached for pockets, hesitated, and then looked around guiltily. I was a block away with no-one in the vicinity before I dared to open Facebook and put an emphatic "like" on the Five Faces for Evelyn Frost.

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THE BEAUTY OF JONATHAN

BY SEAN LEBER ★★★★½

Written and Directed by Piotr J. Lewandowski

Cast: Thomas Sarbacher, Julia Koschitz, Andre M. Hennicke, Jannis Niewohner, Barbara Auer

In the age of high-tech CGI and blockbuster Hollywood movies with big name stars, it is always refreshing to see something new and independent but with stunning cinematography and a great cast.

Johnathan is a German drama. The 23-year-old Jonathan sacrifices himself taking care of his cancer-stricken father Burghardt and works on the family farm with his aunt Martha. Looking after his father is an everyday struggle for Jonathan, one which never seems to end. The relationship between Burghardt and his sister Martha is tense, for years they haven't spoken a word with one another. But when Burghardt's long-lost friend Ron shows up, Jonathan's father thrives. Jonathan, on the other hand, sees Ron as an intruder. His unease grows as he finds out more and more about his past. Then a long-buried family secret puts the father-son relationship to an acid test.

Johnathan has already won the hearts of critics in North America. The film has won awards at the Atlanta Out On Film, Pittsburgh LGBT Film Festival, Salt Lake City LGBT Film Festival, and the San Francisco LGBT Int'l Film Festival.

Johnathan is an involving intense movie with an emotionally charged storyline. The soundtrack beautifully complements the story and visual aspects of the drama deftly exposing generationat conflict and putting a spin on traditional gay-themed storylines. Jonahtan has great casting and is refreshing to watch, a journey without any of the technical distractions that are normally expected from an independent feature film.

-JONATHAN is available in the U.S. and Canada via Wolfe Video on DVD & VOD and across all digital platforms including iTunes, Vimeo On Demand, and WolfeOnDemand.com and many major retailers.

XX PROVES THAT HORROR IS NOT RESTRICTED BY GENDER

BY DREW ROWSOME - ★★★½

“Four Deadly Tales by Four Killer Women” is a great tagline. It harks back to the exploitation roots, and the frequently current status, of the horror genre. “Four Deadly Tales from Four Female Filmmakers” works as well but it is a shame that in 2017 politics still need to be foregrounded. It can’t be argued that women are under-represented in the film industry, as artists in any form, but does XX stand on its own as a horror anthology?

Fortunately the first tagline is more accurate, though it should read “Deadly Tales by Five Killer Women.” The short films are linked by animation created by Sofia Carrillo that manages to be unsettling and beautiful at the same time. Dolls, a horror trope, interact with insects, fabric and mechanical creatures, blinking their unseeing but staring glass eyes towards the viewer as well as the decay around them. An unholy and totally captivating mash-up of Antonella Sigismondi, Dare Wright and Terry Gilliam. These minutes alone make XX a disturbing and worthwhile experience.

The great joy of a collection of horror shorts is how they play with the genre, how the theme is toyed with, how the scares play out as expected or, even better, as unexpected. The first segment, Jovanka Vuckovic’s The Box, is based on a story by Jack Ketchum and it is just as disturbing and haunting as his work. Christmas, food porn and the iconic Night of the Living Dead, weave thematically through a brutally nihilistic storyline filled with creeping dread.

At the time of viewing, I was still framing my reactions, thanks to the second tagline, through a feminist perspective which is amply rewarded by The Box. XX was partially created to express a female perspective and The Box, on the surface, has a lot to say about motherhood, responsibility, body image and the cruelty of children. The son has a line, and a visual, that is still echoing unwelcome in my brain. And then it is upended and snapped into a new focus by the final line in fading voiceover to quite horrific effect.

After more of Carrillo's eerie dolls and bugs, Annie Clark (better known as pop star St Vincent) splashes the screen with colour and deadpan humour. Her own presence - amidst a ghost, a harried housewife and a giant panda - as a kindly malevolent character is a bonus. Part satire, part farce and most definitely unnerving, The Birthday Party keeps everything off balance, like eye candy that one knows is poisoned but can't resist savouring. The final twist is so hilarious and so devastating, that it made me want to watch again immediately to find out how I had got to that state.

Roxanne Benjamin's Don't Fall is the most conventional of the five, playing out a cliché plot with a bit of self-conscious mockery overlaid. That said, the jump scares work, the special effects are well-done and the gory revenge of the downtrodden upon a group of hipsters is always very satisfying. This is also probably the place to mention that all of the segments are sumptuously shot and art directed with a subtlety that falls just short of calling attention to itself. Benjamin's use of fog, shadows and the night is a fun element of deconstruction amidst the gleeful carnage.

Karyn Kusama's Her Only Living Son is a riff on Rosemary's Baby, The Omen and every fear of puberty horror/comedy ever made. It is slow-paced and deliberate with a few shocks - the squirrel! the toenails! - tossed in. While it never finds the balance between

satire and ever-mounting dread, and lacks an effective ending, it does crawl under one's skin and asks questions that we really would prefer not to contemplate.

Taken as a complete entity, XX is an enjoyable addition to the horror anthology genre. Less campy and gore-soaked than most, the films work a more hypnotic psychological horror that sinks its teeth and claws in for the duration. And beyond. As a chromosomal manifesto, it is perhaps a touch too careful and artistic. All of the participants are beyond qualified as filmmakers, and make the female perspective universal through horror and identification. Let's hope this calling card earns them the chance, now that they've proved their point, to cut loose and be killers in whatever format their artistic impulses desire.

- XX begins a theatrical run on Fri, Feb 17 with an iTunes and On Demand release on Fri, March 3.

MOONLIGHT

BY DREW ROWSOME ★★★★½

Once again the Academy Awards have snuck up on me and I'm busily trying to view all the worthy films I missed. Top of my list is Moonlight, the great gay hope of the group.

It's easy to see why Moonlight is nominated for eight awards and has become a hit as well as a, for the most part, critical darling. It is an old-fashioned love story wrapped in social conscientiousness and artily shot in contrasting vibrant vivid colours and sumptuous pools of darkness. Fated to be together from childhood, the central couple suffer, are torn apart and then, against the odds and their own reticence, find each other again. The twist is that the couple are gay and black, two oppressed people for the price of one.

There are moments of extraordinary beauty, sheer visual poetry, in Moonlight and the ending packs an emotional wallop that is all the more devastating for being understated. The acting is, for the most part, heightened naturalism and it is impossible not to be invested in all the characters, none of whom are simply good or evil: there are many gradations and contradictions to be explored. I can't comment on the verisimilitude of the depiction of this version of the black experience, but the gay content rang painfully true. With one exception.

While I fervently believe in romance, true love and soulmates - especially in context of a film, and Moonlight could easily become an uplifting Disney cartoon musical with the removal of a few uses of the n-word and the f-word(s) - there is one plot point that pushed me out of the film and into disbelief. The two teenagers Chiron (Ashton Sanders) and Kevin (Jharrel Jerome), share a furtive romantic moment on the beach that concludes with a hand job. Wiping the cum from his hand by sliding it through the sand is a nice realistic touch, but then the gritty becomes a fairy tale.

One hand job and Chiron, whose sexual fantasies we see and who has been branded and then somewhat accepted himself as gay, never touches another man until the pair meet again in middle age. This would be dubious at the best of times but fantasy fiction when Chiron has had a big coming out/closet door smashing moment, and spent time in prison where he is hardened into the Trevante Rhodes incarnation of Chiron, named “Black.” While the character of Chiron has been established as inarticulate, shy and maddeningly passive, Rhodes is a breathtaking specimen - all abs and muscle that the camera lingers on in a voyeuristically potent combination of lust and fear - and, even interpreting his fabulous physique as circuit boy/sex avoidance armour, it is only in a heterosexual-pandering version of the gay world that Chiron wouldn’t have had at least a handful of hand jobs with the offer of much more.

That said, the fumbling reunion is marvelously and subtly done with stellar performances from Rhodes and Andre Holland. It is an edge of one’s seat with tears coming scene. Of course the actors have not done it on their own. Director/writer Barry Jenkins has laid a solid groundwork with symbols and themes - water, fire, a golden crown-shaped air freshener, addiction, parental failure, the colour blue, the balance between guilt and culpability and survival, and, of course, moonlight - to build to this moment. And there has been heartfelt and strong supporting work done by Mahershala Ali, Janelle Monae and Naomie Harris. And it is a stroke of genius to start with Chiron as a child, nicknamed “Little,” played simply and with heartbreaking vulnerability by Alex Hibbert so that we grow with him and identify strongly.

It’s still a rarity to see a gay love story at the center of a mainstream-aimed film. Sadly, it’s also still a rarity to see a black love story at the center of a mainstream-aimed film. For that reason alone, Moonlight is a wonderful ambitious undertaking that would deserve to be rewarded if it were a fraction as good as it is. That it makes the story as well as the characters individuals who resonate universally, it is a stellar achievement. That it made me wince in anger and recognition before finally shedding tears of joy, it is a film that should not be missed.

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