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Gay and lesbian seasonal • Spring 2011

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Scott Thompson,
Lea DeLaria,
Elvira Kurt,
Cavin Crawford,
Richard Ryder,
Margaret Cho
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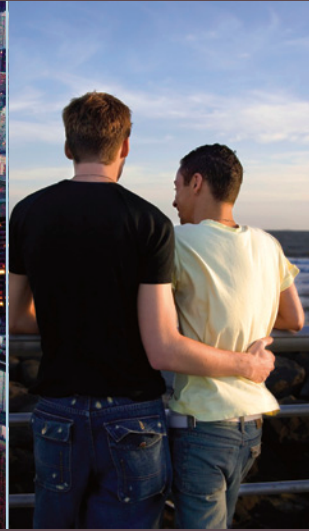
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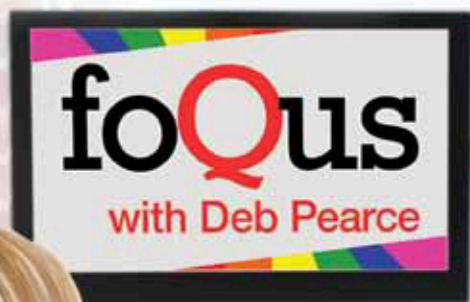
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From the Publisher

Here in the head-office I am often asked, 'How many Publishers does it take to screw in a light bulb?' So I thought I would take a part of this introduction to finally put the question to rest. The answer is: None. It is not the publisher's job to screw in the light bulbs. That is the job of the office staff, and it better be done by three o'clock.

Of course, I'm kidding; the only light we need here is the light of genius and we know they never bother changing the light bulbs. What more could the staff require than genius and the light of the computer screens that I have chained them to? It is a necessary precaution, I assure you. After "The Luxury Issue" I couldn't have them getting any ideas from the scandalous Mr. and Mrs. Holden. Especially not after one employee brought into the office a certain December 1935 issue of *Hush: The Newspaper With a Heart* to my attention. The *Hush* headlined with "Breakfast In Bed," an article that tells the story of the employee's grandfather and his cheating wife. The affair is a "clandestine elopement" between "a Toronto innkeeper and his lowly flame." When I read the piece it seemed to be eerie premonition of the 2010 issue of *winterplay!* that would be published in the same region almost seventy-five years later! Its Depression-era reporting style inspires the same feeling of dramatic intrigue that we tried to capture with "The Holden Affair."

Surprisingly, many parts of the two stories are shockingly parallel. A middle-class house wife, Dorothy Gordon, was lured into an affair with the wealthy Alexander Freeman, just as the Holden maid, Nancy, was seduced by the wife of her rich employer. Fred Vernon Gordon, my employee's grandfather, grew suspicious as: "night after night the gay Dorothy would powder her nose and leave the house for unknown destinations, always giving the excuse that she was out with girl friends." This excuse may have proved less effective for the significantly more 'gay,' Mrs. Holden, if she had made it. As you recall, she did not, and chose to rely on secrecy instead. Both stories turned bad for their respective heroines when the husbands investigated them more closely. "With two amateur detectives, Gordon jumped in a car and trailed the couple," only to find them in suite 218 of The Walper House Hotel, registered as "A.R. Freeman and wife." Likewise, Mr. Holden received a call from his own detectives, who 'outed' the nature of his wayward

wife's disappearances.

When I finished reading the article I was struck by how art unwittingly imitates life. It is so ironic that "Breakfast in Bed," is a piece of my employee's family history. Finding it only weeks after publishing the Holden's story in "The Luxury Issue" only adds to this. The similarity of the two stories is strange enough to begin with. The fact that they take place in almost the same location, in the same period of time, and both have a connection to this magazine is funny. Maybe not 'ha ha' funny, but humorous enough to fit nicely as an introduction to this issue of *springplay!*

Another piece of news fitting for an introduction is the birth of the first ever Inspire Awards. The idea came to me while I was attending a travel conference and someone mentioned the word 'awards.' On the break, I immediately got in touch with Pride Toronto, Deb Pearce, PFLAG Canada (Toronto, York and Durham chapters), Rainbow High Vacations, Pride Durham, Positive Lite, and Club 717 in order to start working on an annual LGBTQ awards initiative for Toronto and neighbouring regions. Between January 30th and May 10th nominations are being accepted for LGBTQ Person of the Year, LGBTQ Youth of the Year, and LGBTQ Business of the Year. Go check it out at www.inspireawards.ca. There you can nominate the person or business you think is most deserving of recognition from the community. To honour the selected individuals there will be an Awards Gala on June 16th, as well as a float in the Toronto Pride Parade.

Life, as enlightened philosopher Thomas Hobbes once said, "can at times be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. It's important that we take time to acknowledge the people who make it brighter and enjoy the occasional funny story when we come across it." I have always been a firm believer in this, as well as a huge fan of comedy, and so without further ado I welcome you to "The Very Funny Issue."

Antoine Elhashem



springplay!

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Correction: With regard to the "Hot Artist" profile in our last *winterplay!* edition, we would like to offer a clarification. Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights was erroneously solely attributed to Gurbeen Bhasin, when in fact, it was conceived and authored by Nancy Nicol who invited Bhasin to take part in it. Nicol launched Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights in 2009, after two years of preparatory research, bringing together an international team of more than 50 partner groups and individual scholars, legal experts, human rights workers, community groups and NGOs based in Canada, South East Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Naz Foundation (India) Trust is one of those partners. Bhasin is honoured to be part of this project and is very hopeful that it can help raise global LGBT human rights awareness.

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From the Editor

Editor

I believe that kids who grow up today never having known the unedited antics of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck are seriously missing out on one of the funniest, most clever and imaginative cartoons ever created. Not only did Bugs surreptitiously introduce me to the classics of Opera and the Symphony, but he was my first exposure to Shakespeare and how entertaining a man in a dress could be. To this day, I can let a one liner rip from that wascally wabbit and have every one of my friends, family and work acquaintances rhyme off the follow-up as we all burst into uproarious laughter.

The same goes with Jim Henson's wonderful Muppets. Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy were out and proud of their interspecies love, even if Piggy had a wandering eye for the sexy male guest stars. True to her French form, these flirtations would never last and always end with one of her super karate chops, capable of taking out anyone who got in the way of her passions and diva attitude.

I grew up giggling to Carol Burnet's outrageous antics and in recent years I was a huge fan of Patsy and Edina of *Ab Fab* fame—and really, were they not just a much more adult version of Bugs and Daffy? The first time I saw Margaret Cho live, she had me laughing so hard I could barely breathe.

So what makes us laugh? Why is it important for us to laugh and why does it always make us feel so good? Karen explores the science of the guffaw and makes some pretty interesting discoveries, learning that laughter is indeed the best medicine, while Shelley shares with us the blessing of a light heart.

As I worked on "The Very Funny Issue" I was reminded how we Canadians, with our easy-going, laid back politeness, have produced some of the

funniest comedians on the planet. Anyone who's watched *Kids in the Hall*, *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, or been to a Just for Laughs festival can attest to this. With icons like Scott Thompson, Rick Mercer and Elvira Kurt, our funny queers have been on the pioneering edge of the biting cleverness that is at the heart of our country's wit. And thanks to allies like Maggie Cassella and her We're Funny That Way festival, we've been continually discovering and nurturing fresh talent.

I think we excel at combining the in-your-face boldness of our neighbours to the south, with the dry satire of our British ancestors, into a rapid fire cleverness that keeps us ever ready to poke fun at ourselves. I believe it's an unspoken Canadian motto to never take ourselves too seriously. It's for that very reason that we have such a generally positive and open-minded world view, which in this day and age of radical global changes, makes a sense of humour all that more valuable.

With so many forms of humour out there, surely there is a brand out there to tickle everyone's funny bone, so grab our issue and a friend to share it with—because laughter is best enjoyed with company. And yes, I'll stop calling you Shirley.

Jeffrey Harrison



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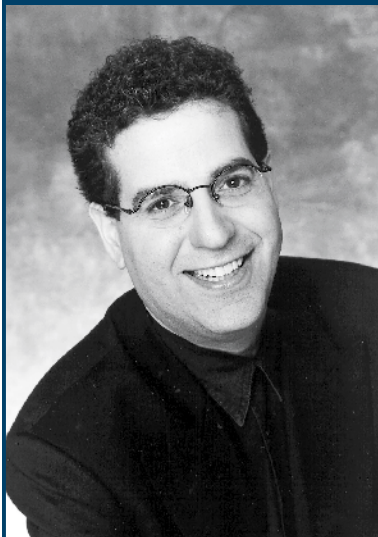


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LOL!

We're Funny That Way



Maggie Cassella, Scott Freethy and Shannon McDonough

by Scott Dagostino

After starring in his own sketch comedy show, followed by the CBC news parody *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, it's hard to believe there was ever a time when Gavin Crawford paced about the house, wondering how to be funny.

"It started because Sky Gilbert had these weird open-mic nights at Buddies, where you got five minutes to do anything," he says. "It was a complete free-for-all." Crawford had been inspired by the monologues of Lily Tomlin and Whoopi Goldberg but was unsure how to translate that theatrical style into a traditional stand-up comedy format. Egged on by his partner Kyle, he performed at Buddies and the Rivoli before discovering the second year of *We're*

Funny That Way, Canada's queer comedy festival produced by lawyer-turned-comic Maggie Cassella.

"I went to Maggie's house and dropped off a videotape with a letter asking for any advice she could give," says Crawford. "She called me and said, 'First of all, I HATE YOU! I watched that tape and I really fucking hate you. Second, I'm putting you in the gala.'" Cassella admits she was tempted for a moment with two choices: reject Crawford or "watch him kill the room, VAULT OVER ME and get his own show on the Comedy Network, which is what happened." Crawford says the reaction he got at the gala gave him "a huge boost of confidence" that soon carried him into *Second City* and beyond.

Of all the performing arts, stand-up comedy offers perhaps the greatest risk and reward. While

an actor can rely on a script and a singer can deliver a song, a stand-up comic is alone on a stage, facing an audience with only his or her wit. It's all the terror of public speaking, up against the subjective nature of one's sense of humour and, for queer comics, a longtime comedy-club culture of homophobia. Yet they're compelled to keep getting up in front of the mic, word-warriors ready to kill or bomb. Cassella's We're Funny That Way festival captured the energy of the pioneering queer stand-ups and showcased the younger performers now changing the comedy scene itself.

Two decades on, it's the classic gay joke: "I came out to my family on Thanksgiving," began Bob Smith, "I said, "'Mom, please pass the gravy to a homosexual.' She passed it to my father." With his boy-next-door charm, Smith began doing stand-up in Buffalo in 1977 at the age of 19 before coming out onstage in New York in 1986.

"I wondered if the audience would be hostile," Smith says, "The news then about gay men seemed to be only about AIDS," but he was a hit with audiences and the homophobia he encountered was manageable. "In supposedly liberal Seattle," he says, "half the audience walked out during my 45 minute set. There was no overt hostility, just voting with your feet."

Here in Toronto, however, Scott Thompson wasn't as lucky. Before becoming one-fifth of legendary sketch troupe The Kids in the Hall, Thompson braved the Yuk Yuks' amateur stages after graduating university. "It was such a homophobic environment, I couldn't stand it," he says, "And I hadn't even come out of the closet yet! In those days, gay men were the targets. Always." Viciously

homophobic comedians like Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay were hugely popular and Thompson was mocked by the other comics even when being introduced. "They'd wipe the microphone or pretend to be getting a blowjob, always attacking my masculinity."

Thompson was dazzled by British comedian Simon Fanshawe, who appeared in Toronto in 1986: "He told the audience he was gay and the room got really quiet and nervous and he said, 'That's the sound of 200 assholes snapping shut.'" Fanshawe won huge acclaim in the UK but soon switched careers and became a respected broadcast journalist.

"I do love [stand-up comedy]," Fanshawe told BBC News in 1998, "but I don't love it enough to go through the kind of ritual humiliation you do have to go through in order to make it right." Thompson agreed. Stand-up, he says, "is a macho world and I didn't have the emotional equipment to deal with it...It's the football of performing."

Then who better to take the field than the unstoppable Lea Delaria? "When I first started in San Francisco in 1982," she says, "I was billed as 'That Fucking Dyke.'"

Thompson laughs and says, "I don't think Lea was in the closet a day in her life. She was born clutching a dildo."



LOL!

After the two met, DeLaria says they bonded over their status as outspoken outsiders, even within the gay community. "I wasn't a lesbian, I was QUEER and back then, that was very outrageous," DeLaria says. Yet her influence was huge.

Maggie Cassella raves, "I only got my start because Lea said to me, 'You're funny, you should do stand-up. Just open the paper and read the news.' She gave me my act!"

"One great thing about the early performers," says Bob Smith, "is that we were all mutual fans and would attend each other's shows." It was easy to, Smith says, because an "embarrassing" number of queer stand-up comics were still in the closet at that point, afraid for their careers—even Ellen! When Smith asked Toronto comic Elvira Kurt to open for his comedy trio Funny Gay Males in 1990 (a tale told on our "Looking Back" page), it began a friendship that is, he says, "one of the most important relationships in my life."

While Smith, Kurt, Cassella and the brilliant political humourist Kate Clinton were slowly winning over mainstream audiences, it was DeLaria who surprised everyone in 1993 by being chosen to appear on the then-top-rated Arsenio Hall Show, where she famously declared, "It's the 1990s, it's hip to be queer, and I'm a bi-i-i-i-g dyke!" For America, it was a cultural atom bomb and DeLaria laughs, "Someone counted—I was on the air for a total of nine minutes and said 'dyke' or 'fag' or 'queer' 46 times! I was always very proud of that."

In 1996, Cassella teamed up with documentarian David Adkin to create a showcase for a growing movement. "I was really honored when Maggie asked me to be a part of the first We're Funny That

Way fest," says Smith and each spring for 15 years now (with an exception here or there), Buddies in Bad Times Theatre has been a platform for Canadian queer performers, including Jonathan Wilson, Ed Sahely, The B-Girlz, David Tomlinson, Lex Vaughn, Ted Morris, Trevor Boris and Richard Ryder.

"I'd had a few years of stand-up under my belt when I did Maggie's festival," says actor Liam Doherty, "but to be in an all-queer show was really exciting. I'd been used to playing clubs where most of the time I was the only gay comic on the bill and it was more fun to be on a night where everyone was gay. There was a comfort

level." The crowd could easily relate when Doherty explained how no one could pronounce his name in school: "I got called Lyam...Lime...Fag."

The success of We're Funny That Way spawned events like Buddies' annual Homo Night in Canada fundraiser and boosted the profile of queer comics in general, but stand-up remained as difficult an art form as ever. Sure, for a few years there, says Cassella, "All you had to do was say you were gay and you got \$500, but trying to float a career on just your sexuality is self-oppressive."

"I know a lot of people, male and female, who were doing stand-up in the 90s but not now," says Doherty, "I think it's a very



short-lived career...You're standing around in a bar, waiting for your five-minute gig at midnight, and as you get older, it's a very small group of people who can still keep up that energy."

By 2002, *NOW* magazine critic Glenn Sumi was asking, "Where are the queer comics? A few years ago they were everywhere... but where are their successors?...With the exception of the annual We're Funny That Way fest, no one has the will or grace to mount a successful queer comedy night."

Sumi only needed to be patient. While OUTtv and Proud FM provided new forums for comics like Ryder and Deb Pearce, newbies flocked to the amateur open-mic Wednesday, hosted by Jo-Anna Downey at Spirits on Church Street and comic/producer Andrew Johnston stepped up as a rival to Cassella with his all-women showcase for a gay audience, Bitch Salad.

"There's not really one queer comedy scene," says Johnston. While he praises Scott Thompson and Gavin Crawford as influences, Johnston says younger gay comics are more aligned with the sensibilities of Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, Sarah Silverman and the women of SNL, rejecting the queer comic label that Cassella and the others built.

"Maggie comes from a time when that was radical," says Johnston, "I absolutely respect and appreciate that. I would not be doing what I'm doing now had she not done it. But I'm living in a very different world and I don't think about being gay every second of my day. It doesn't wholly inform my comedy."

Ian Lynch, fellow comic and producer, says being

labelled a gay comic has mostly helped him but notes, "It was only just a few years ago that people acted like there could only be one gay comic in the city."



Shawn Hitchens

Echoing Doherty's experience, Lynch says, "You'd never see two gay comics together in a show. It was like, 'one is exotic, two is the drama club,' so he produced Sausage Party, an all-gay comedy night that included

Johnston, Vong Sundara and Marco Bernardi. "There's a kind of brotherhood amongst young gay comics now," Lynch says, counting Johnston, and Trevor Boris as friends.

A wistful Scott Thompson says, "Guys like Trevor and Ian are absolutely the new wave...I marvel at their ease on stage. They don't have to spend their first 15 minutes lulling the audience into submission or bludgeoning them either." Before, he says, "You couldn't just say, 'I'm gay,' and move on, but now... you don't even have to say it."

One assumes any jealousy Thompson might feel would be replaced with pride (and perhaps a bit of age shock) upon meeting 23-year-old comedian Mae Martin, who says, "I saw the Kids In The Hall live at Massey Hall when I was about 13 and it was a bit of a religious experience. People were screaming out the lines to sketches like it was a rock concert." In her own act, Martin enjoys mixing comedy and singing, celebrating "my adventures in androgyny and my secret fantasy of being Justin Bieber."

"Mae Martin is THE SHIT," exclaims fan and fellow cabaret performer Shawn Hitchens, who, like Martin and Crawford, was less interested in stand-up and



LOL!

more involved in character comedy. "I wanted to tell stories," Hitchins says and the songs entered the scene because, he jokes, "If I'm going to be on stage for 30-40 minutes, I'll need some filler!" As one-third of the vibrant and beloved drag group The B-Girlz, Hitchins has long strived to expand the boundaries of what queer comedy can be.

Good, says Lea DeLaria, dropping a challenge on everyone: "The vast majority of gay comics have become very complacent. They just want to tour around, playing to their same audience who will die out with them. I'm interested in the ones who are actually trying to make a statement and affect change. I don't want to hear about your period or your socks in the dryer or how hard it is to go through airport security now. Who fucking cares?"

Cassella agrees, saying, "I can't tell you how many tapes I get for the festival and I say, 'Dude, Bob Smith did that joke! A hundred years ago!' Unless your coming-out story involves Golda Meir or Gandhi, I HAVE HEARD IT BEFORE!"

Harsh? Not at all, as they've watched their friends REALLY work for a joke. A few years ago, DeLaria says, "Bob Smith called me and said, 'Lea, I have Lou Gerhig's Disease. And I throw like a girl.'" Then, as the Kids in the Hall reunited in 2009 for their CBC miniseries *Death Comes To Town*, Thompson was diagnosed with cancer. "Anyone who wasn't a comic wouldn't get it," says DeLaria, "but Scott and I pissed ourselves with laughter when he got cancer. Just joke after joke! It's how we deal."

Smith is now a novelist, with a zany Bush-era time-travel novel due this summer, while Thompson plans a return to TV and, perhaps surprisingly, stand-up. "I'm not afraid of it anymore, I love it." Just don't put him on a bill with an anger comic. "We all know that if you're a stand-up comedian, of COURSE you're furious. Of COURSE you had a terrible childhood. No NORMAL person would do this," he laughs.

"Ten years from now, some gay Chris Rock will come along and he'll be revolutionary," says Andrew Johnston, "But that's not right now and it makes my heart ache knowing it won't be me," he laughs, though it might

be his friend Ian Lynch. In addition to being proud of the dialogue amongst high-schoolers that his MTV talk show, *1 Girl, 5 Gays* has created, Lynch says, "With Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, people can form a relationship with their favourite comics. I've had lots of young people write me, asking for advice. I post stand-up clips and I made an *It Gets Better* video and all that."

Where comics were once at the mercy of homophobic audiences and club bookers, while dreaming of a TV sitcom, actor/writer David Tomlinson agrees that the internet is making DIY comedy possible. He's produced a YouTube series called *Cordelia*, featuring himself and Dora Award-winning actor Ryan Kelly as two gay roommates caught in an amusingly sinister conspiracy. "Why must we always be just the fun sidekicks or bitchy reality-show judges?" Tomlinson asks, "Let's tell new stories, talk about our culture!" Rather than wait for TV networks to discover comics, he asks, "Why aren't more of us doing this?"

There will be, says Mae Martin. Over in the UK (but back in town for a Pride show), she says, "There seem to be many more female and gay comics on the club circuit than there ever have been...I think people are realizing that straight male audiences actually can relate to and enjoy gay comics and female comics."



"The comedy scene today has totally changed while it's remained the same," jokes Richard Ryder, "The new comics are always annoying. The old ones are always bitter and the ones in the middle of their careers are too busy to notice or care about anyone but themselves. Trends in humour change but the nature of the beast is forever!"

Ryder will be the opening comedy headliner at Maggie Cassella's next venture: a pub and cabaret she's called (and trademarked!) a "pubaret." The Flying Beaver on Parliament will provide performers "a space where they don't have to be distracted by noises in the back or people walking in during their set or whatever," says Casella, "I've always liked the cabaret space at Buddies...that's the kind of room I was looking for. We stumbled on a place and basically, I'm buying myself a job," she jokes.

With this going on, Cassella is postponing the gala 15th anniversary of WFTW until next year, when she hopes David Adkin will be able to do a follow-up documentary. In the meantime, the Flying Beaver is ready to go, and Gavin Crawford is delighted. "I learned early on that you can't do character monologues in a curling rink lit by two trucks," he laughs, "so this is perfect. The more spaces there are for people to get out and do stuff, the better comedy we'll have...and now that I'm leaving *22 Minutes*, I'll have somewhere to go! I get to knock on Maggie's door again and say, 'Hi, I don't know what to do.'"

Scott Dagostino is a Toronto-based freelance writer who adores the city that Canada loves to hate. He rambles on at www.scottdagostino.com.



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The Science of Laughter...

by Karen Fulcher



LAUGH, IT'S GOOD FOR YOU!

I have always wanted to check out these laughter yoga classes I'd see glued to lamp posts around Toronto but never pursued it until now. After some research I found and contacted Salimah Kassim-Lakha, a modern day Yogi who specializes in kundalini and laughter yoga. She suggested we chat over Skype and once we were logged on, she told me of her journey. Kassim-Lakha studied hatha yoga in India and decided to run her first laughter yoga class by holding up a sign in Trinity Bellwood park. Before she knew it, 10-20-30 people came and practiced with her. It was obvious to Kassim-Lakha that she was on the right path—so much so that she established Yogapolooza at Pride as well!



LOL!

"People often feel that if they are more serious, perhaps people will take them more seriously," she told me. Kassim-Lakha, however, feels that approaching life with lightheartedness is the way to go. After our chat, she offered one of her classes for me to try so I could get a real sense of what laughter yoga was all about.

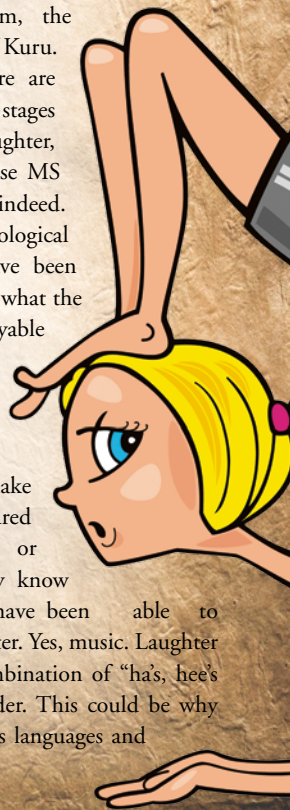
Of course I was thrilled and attended a class of about 70 people. Most everyone had their arms crossed at the start and stood well back from Kassim-Lakha until she drew us in and began coaching us through a series of clapping and stomping exercises along with chants of "ho, ho" "ha, ha, ha!" She told us the body doesn't know whether our laughter is faked or not. Before long, we were turning to our neighbours and greeting them with loud laughter. It was an early morning for me and at the end, I felt energized and like I had somehow, in a small way, connected with the folks that were standing near me. The exercise I liked the most was raising our hands in the air and yelling, "I learn from my mistakes, hahahahahahaha!" She ended the twenty-minute class with a delightful message, "I am happy (arms open wide), I am good (hands over the heart), I am strong (arms up showing off those biceps), I am peaceful (hands out in front showing peace sign), and then... I am excellent, excellent, excellent (snapping fingers)."

Kassim-Lakha has designed her classes to be accessible to anyone, no matter age, gender or physical condition. You can get a sense of her classes by visiting her website, www.yogavision.com/laughter-yoga. It was a simple activity that had a powerful impact on feelings of connection. She called this the ripple effect: you leave a class more easily able to laugh and bring your mirth to others, perhaps creating amusement and light feelings with loved ones—spreading the good around. "When we laugh, we are doing the world a service," she told me with a smile. Just like the sign I saw on a local community centre in my area that said: "A kind word can warm a full three months of winter."

My experience during the class got me thinking about the nature of laughter. Why is it that we feel so good after laughing? I mean, apparently we experience the following: 18 or so spasms of our diaphragm, the contraction of most muscles in the face (of which there are 40 plus), our nostrils dilate, lower jaw vibrates, head is thrown back, trunk straightened—almost backwards until tiredness throws it forward into a bend, blood rushes to our skin's surface and our eyes slightly bulge with tears, we gasp for air and maybe even pee. If you didn't know I was talking about laughter, it doesn't sound particularly fun, does it?

It wouldn't be fun if you are from small areas of New Guinea and a member of the Fore tribe because the major cause of death was Kuru, the "Laughing Death." Luckily, the tribe no longer suffers from such a bad joke because they no longer practice cannibalism, the commonly thought cause of Kuru. Although in the west there are diseases that in their final stages include uncontrolled laughter, among them Wilson's disease MS and ALS—an odd joke indeed. However, the reported psychological effects of this laughter have been positive. It seems no matter what the cause of laughter, it is enjoyable and lifts the spirits.

Laughter is found in animals, too. Those silly scientists found that rats, chimps and apes make sounds that are structured as laughter when tickled or playing. And how do they know it is laughter? Well, they have been able to pinpoint the music of laughter. Yes, music. Laughter has a structured sound combination of "ha's, hee's and ho's" and a specific order. This could be why laughter is recognized across languages and cultures.



There must be something to the benefits of laughter as laughter clubs and laughter yoga are gaining popularity since at least 1995, when Madan Kataria of India established Laughing Clubs International, steadfastly believing in the physical benefits of regular laughing. And here in our very own city, a religious man named Rodney Howard-Browne brought a 1994 renewal of the Pentecostal church, Airport Vineyard, through the controversial "Holy Laughter" during which members experience uncontrollable and contagious laughter during sermons and the church has claimed healings.

Could the "lifting of the spirits" be the only thing that influences healing? Is humour simply a panacea to the harmful effects of stress, anxiety and anger that are impossible to coexist with laughter? The most famous case of healing through humour is that of Norman Cousins who in the '70s took daily high doses of vitamin C and episodes of

Candid Camera and the Marx Brothers to recover from a life-threatening and painful illness. There has been some promising research since then that shows a link between laughter and women achieving pregnancy (oh dear!) and laughter helping alleviate children's symptoms in hospital programs. Both studies included clowns (odd since a fear of clowns is so prevalent!) and there is a Canadian Association of Therapeutic Clowns, I kid you not. Other studies have found a link to laughter releasing natural morphine-like, pain-control chemicals in the brain except that there hasn't been evidence that

shows any increased levels of endorphins following laughter.

The problem with the rest of the body of research has been typical of scientifically proving anything: you must have a large enough pool of subjects and

“ Could the “lifting of the spirits” be the only thing that influences healing? ”

you must follow scrupulous research techniques. Although much of the research to date has indicated things like immune system functions being stimulated none of them have been able to point to a direct link between good health and long life to laughter or relatedly, a sense of humour.

Psychological studies have found that there are some specific ways that people use laughter to create an experience of "us and them." In romantic situations, researchers believe that the couple that laughs together will stay together. Related to this is the idea that the sense of humour we look for in a potential date for example depends on our gender, sexual preference and how dominant we are or our sought out partner is. It is more likely that a female looking for a dominant partner will enjoy the date more if the date makes her laugh. And the date enjoys being the provider of laughter. But if the date laughs too much, the female may be turned off. Although these studies only relate to heterosexual dates, one might extrapolate to dominance in general? Is the joke teller the more dominant in a relationship?

Other studies have shown that laughter can be used to reinforce leadership especially when used to exclude others. The social tool of laughter can be quite powerful to silence, ridicule and control others as in the case of bullying. Sarcasm is hidden aggression, "I was only kidding" is a way to say something hurtful and hide behind a joke as the



LOL!

intention. In Japan, parents might find that telling their children to stop a behaviour, as people might laugh at them, an effective discipline. Being laughed at is one of the worst things that could happen to you in Japanese culture. In some communities, laughter settles conflict. Eskimos in Greenland publicly tease the other with the audience's laughter as jury. Inuit women face off with throat singing and find that the one who laughs first, loses and the Inuit have been playing laughter games for a long time. So laughter is a double-edged sword used to create connection and exclusion.

But laughter is an extremely powerful way to connect a group and doesn't need a joke or teased subject. We have all experienced the contagious nature of laughter simply by being around someone we like who is laughing. If you need demonstrated proof of the contagious nature of laughter, meet Doug Collins: thelaughman.com. The television industry knows this too well about the human race and uses it to create the illusion of funniness through the laugh track.

So, why do we laugh? What could be the evolutionary function of this contagious and uncontrolled, universally recognized behaviour?

I decided to talk to Dr Ami Rokach who lectures at York University and is researching the subject of loneliness. Dr Rokach referenced the quote by Victor Borge: "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people" in answer to my question about why research points to people seldom laughing when they are alone. He surmised that "we are more likely to laugh in groups and because we are looking for the best way to connect with others and laughter is a good channel."

What about the Internet age?

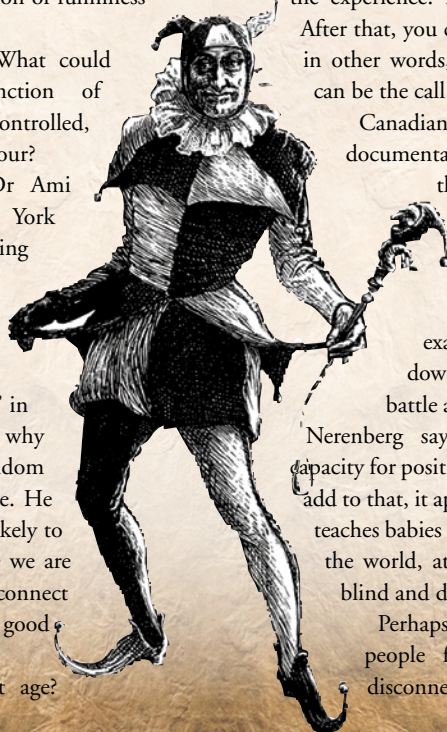
I asked Rokach. He replied, "it is unlikely to help us feel connected if we are over the age of eighteen, especially since many of us aren't actually laughing or connecting with other human beings." Dr Rokach felt that chatting on the Internet as a way to soothe the ubiquitous experience of loneliness will fail because "as adults it may be a laziness or because it feels easy to connect on [Facebook or Twitter] but it results in more loneliness... and in the end, it really is just a person in a room with a machine."

Why is it so hard for us to admit we're lonely and get out there for a good laugh? Rokach explained, "We live in a 'couple culture.' To be alone is equal to failing in our culture and because our culture doesn't accept failure, this is doubly problematic... this prevents people from admitting loneliness." And thus we shy away from admitting we want connection.

Rokach suggests that when you feel loneliness (which we all do from time to time), "don't run from the experience. It can give you great insight. After that, you can do something about it." So in other words, finding others to laugh with can be the call to action.

Canadian Albert Nerenberg filmed the documentary, *Laughology*, which explores the nature of laughter and helps explain it. Nerenberg feels that humans are equally wired to laugh as to fight and uses staring contests as an example. Two people are staring down each other before engaging in battle and both crack up? This proves, Nerenberg says, that humans have equal capacity for positive emotions as negative, and to add to that, it appears to be biological. Nobody teaches babies to laugh; they just start, all over the world, at 2-4 months of age and even blind and deaf babies laugh.

Perhaps laughter is affective in making people feel better, feel a little less disconnected, a little more attached to



others if just for a moment. When you share a laugh with someone, it seems that we are just doing what comes naturally. Evolutionarily speaking, laughter seems to increase empathy and create bonds between groups and friends. Perhaps laughter is something necessary for our survival. In these times of economic problems, environmental disasters, wars and horror stories we need some empathy and bonding and if laughter does that, then let's get to it.

Karen Fulcher got to laugh a lot during the writing of this article and thanks Pink Play Mags for assigning it to her!



NEED A LITTLE **BOOST** TO START YOUR LAUGHTER PLAN?

- ❖ Check out stereomood.com and select the "happy" or "sunny day" station and stream some music to get you in the mood.
- ❖ Throw a "Laughter Party:" visit laughterparty.net to find out how or join the Facebook group www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=83872125732.
- ❖ Spread the contagious smile by infecting others randomly on the street or on public transit (Nerenberg says it is virtually impossible to avoid smiling if someone smiles at you—test it!).
- ❖ Try some "laughersize," find out more here: laughercize.com.
- ❖ Go to World Laughter day on Sunday, May 1st and you can participate at Lululemon on Queen Street West at 9:30 am.
- ❖ Enroll in a laughter yoga class and find out for yourself what the benefits are. Check out Salimah Kassim-Lakha's classes on her website: www.yogavision.com
- ❖ And if it's a laughter emergency, employ the tickle (but only with your close friends, lovers and family).



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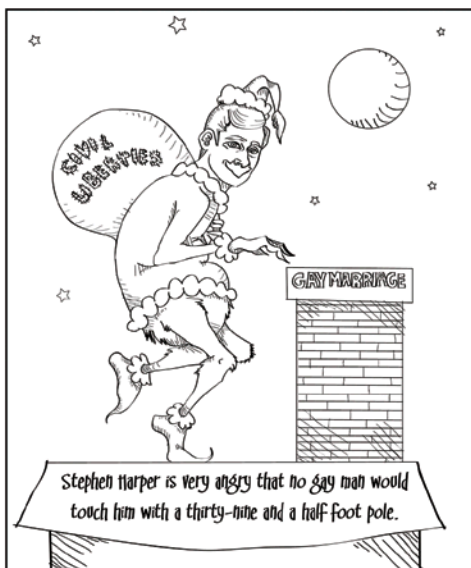


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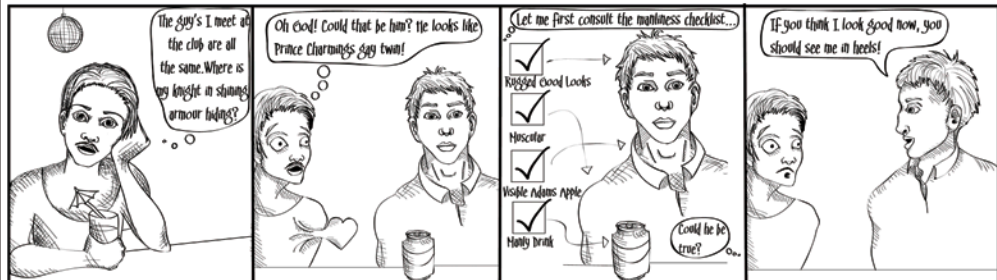
BY SHERRY BRIDGE

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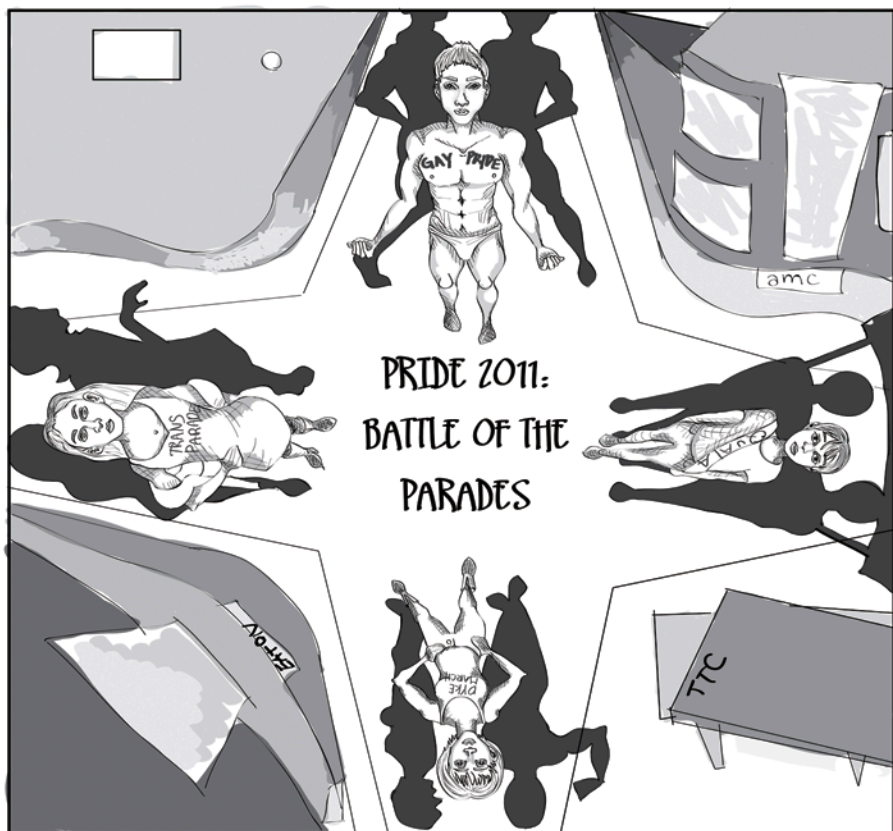


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COMEDY on the ROAD

by Bryen Dunn

Many look at a road trip as an opportunity to explore the vastness of this universe that we call home, myself included. Others see it as a burst of inspiration, or an educational experience. For those coined road warriors, travel can sometimes seem like more of a chore than a passing flight of fancy.

I recently had the opportunity to chat with a few comedic personalities about their experiences on the road, and they've shared their thoughts.



LOL!

When Toronto veteran Maggie Cassella created *We're Funny That Way*, one of the first queer comedy festivals started 15 years ago in Toronto, it became a production that many others credit for their own entry onto the scene. Darcy Michael, who recently completed his first CD titled *You're Gay Now*, says, "It was a great festival to wet my feet in," while Jennie McNulty, who has done shows in clubs, casinos, cruises, and in combat, declares, "I had a blast. I love Toronto!" It's events like this that encourage others to step out.

Many credit other comedic geniuses as their inspiration for launching into comedy. Danilea Saioni gives props to Steve Martin, Carol Burnett and Gilda Radner. "Later in life I saw a documentary called *Wisecracks* about female comics, discovered Sandra Shamas, and knew comedy was for me," she says. Proudly bisexual and polyamorous, Saioni, created the 'C' Word fundraiser in Toronto that is now in its third successful year, and she's also the brains behind *West End Girls*, a regular comedy series that gives aspiring comedians an opportunity on the stage.

David C. Jones adored watching and studying Carol Burnett, and is now an established filmmaker, a director of live shows, and producer of events, including *The Bobbers*, a queer comedy Improv in Vancouver. Martha Chaves, who is a regular at Yuk Yuk's, where she began her stand-up career in 1993 in Montreal, cites George Carlin, Elayne Boosler, and her mother. Ryan Steele, who hails from Vancouver and is the creator behind several comedic videos appearing all over YouTube as part of *The Ryan Steele Show*, remembers, "My inspiration for getting into the field of comedy is *Saturday Night Live*." Whereas Michael is straight up and admits that it's "weed" that gives him his inspiration.

Once comedians get their acts established in their home towns, eventually there's a time when the baby has to leave the cradle and hit the road, even if it's the next town an hour up the road. "I've had my best sets ever in St. John's and New York City," says Saioni.

Jones enjoys travelling where he can "bring queer comedy to straight and family audiences. Truth is, I love the gay festivals, but there is something totally cool to being an out gay performer at a non-gay specific event."

McNulty loves hitting the stage no matter where. "The hour I'm onstage is truly the coffee break of my job. I love that part. I love making people laugh," she says. "I love being on the road and whether it's in the middle of nowhere USA or a resort in the Bahamas you can explore and find fun things or facts. I love to walk around and explore the cities I'm in."

Long time show gal Margaret Cho, who won a comedy contest where first prize was opening for Jerry Seinfeld, finds travelling to be very taxing and just getting there is sometimes the most difficult part. "I find it much better to go by bus, which is how I did the last tour. It's my rolling home, like a really, really, really big bag with wheels", she says. Life on the road can become quite routine as she laments, "It's wake up, make coffee in the bus, do some writing or press stuff, sound check, eat, do show, watch a movie with John Roberts, drive to the next city while sleeping, and repeat every day for several months."

Michael finds the whole leaving the house part a bit stressful. "My cats suffer from separation anxiety, and I owe lots of people money. I'd love a six month stint in Mexico so I can drink for cheap, but I'm happy with going to Red Deer too. I find travelling much the same as when I'm



at home, spent watching Oprah and crying in the shower," he says with a smile.

Shelley Marshall, a Toronto comedian who has opened for the *Puppetry of the Penis* tour, recently returned from an international list of performances. The proud mother of two gay offspring, she misses the time with her kids most. "Sure you can Skype, but I need to be able to smack them once and a while," she laughs. As for her favourite spots to perform, she surmises, "I'll take a small town legion over a big city corporate gig any day. I don't like to be censored!"

"I sacrifice a lot of my personal life to make room for comedy," Steele adds.

Comedians often work their routines around things that happen to them as part of their travels or daily regimes. Sometimes even uncomfortable subject matter can be turned into comedic material. "For my 40th birthday I got cancer," Saioni admits. "I'm a comic, so my natural instinct was to make jokes about it—but when I did, I got heckled. Even friends and family were uncomfortable discussing it."

Steele divulges, "I had testicular cancer when I was 19. I had the testicle removed, went through two months of chemotherapy and had a strip of lymph nodes taken out of my stomach."

While Marshall confesses, "After a 3 month hospital stay for a failed suicide attempt, I knew I could do anything."

Saioni turned her bout with cancer into a now popular fundraising event for Gilda's Club, which she credits with helping her to a successful recovery. Steele also overcame his testicular cancer at a young age, and now often jokes about his lopsided manhood. "I got a fake testicle at the age of 25 and have made fun of it several times in sketches I have written over the years," he says. Cho once landed in the hospital with kidney failure, after a period of self-abuse, and continued performing to sold-out audiences. Perhaps there is some truth to the saying that laughter is the best medicine.

As anyone who travels frequently knows, there are some things that are a necessity to pack before leaving the house. Steele sticks it old school with a trusty map, whereas Chaves asks, "You mean besides the basics, leather outfit and whip? Duct Tape, flat iron, iPod, laptop, a novel that is my

amulet—*Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand*—socks, many socks, and vitamins."

Cho aims for practicality, "A yoga mat, Kindle, and protein powder," she says, while Michael quips, "I'm quite happy as long as I can take Rihanna along!"

As for what were some of their most memorable shows, a reoccurring theme was performing in front of the military. Chaves recollects, "I went to entertain the UN peacekeeping troops in Israel, Egypt and Afghanistan. I am a former political refugee from Nicaragua and a queer immigrant of colour and off I went to tell jokes in the Middle East."

McNulty states, "The most rewarding shows I've ever done were for the US military in Iraq, Afghanistan, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Those are some amazing people doing some really hard work over there. We don't belong over there and should never, in my opinion, have gone to Iraq. Yet our brave men and women are there because they feel it their duty, and I cannot respect them enough. God bless each and every one of them. On a selfish note, they are fantastic crowds! They're so happy to see people from home they'd laugh at anything. Not that I don't give them a good reason to laugh," she says with a smirk.



LOL!

Jones also confirms, "I got to do a Canadian Armed Forces tour about ten years ago and that was such a special time travelling and making soldiers laugh in places like Bosnia, Israel and Egypt."

Comedians often use the audience to get laughs at their expense, but what if the tables were turned? Saioni remembers, "Once at a show a drunken chick yelled out 'slut,' but being called a slut hasn't actually upset me since grade nine."

Others admit to somewhat embarrassing moments on the stage, such as Jones going onstage "with a tiny pee stain on my pants," and Michael spilling a bottle of water on his crotch. "I had to stand up there for 20 minutes looking like I had pissed my pants," he reflects.

Cho shares, "I split my lip on the microphone and was bleeding down my face during the show."

Chaves recalls, "I was faking a middle-eastern accent and phlegm came out of my mouth directly to my shirt (boob) and I didn't notice that the thing was there until several horrified front-row members pointed at it."

"I did an entire show with a long strand of toilet paper hanging out of the back of my pants from waist to floor," McNulty reminisces, "but at least they knew I lined the seat."

Marshall once congratulated a woman on her pregnancy thinking it was a baby shower, but it was an engagement party. "It is something you can't take back. You can only order her a drink and slip one of your pills in it," she declares.

The future certainly looks bright for many of these individuals. Marshall is currently producing her successful *The Full Bawdy Comedy Show* for

a small tour, before heading to the UK for a six month stint in April. "During this time I'll also be working out the details for my one woman show, *Hold Mommy's Cigarette*."

Saioni is keeping busy with her *West End Girls* series in Toronto, which she is hoping to tour with. "I just sold a reality show to a small production company and another reality pilot I wrote just got produced," she announces.

"I'm going back to work on *Drop Dead Diva*," says Cho, "and also *The Yellow Album*, my new musical project."

Chaves is working on her play *Staying Alive* and hopes to complete a book in the near future as well.

Steele happily admits, "I have never been busier as a solo performer, and my main goal this year is to write a two person show with my sidekick Amy Goodmurphy."

McNulty hosts her own show called *Walking Funny With...* on AfterEllen.com, and reports "I've also started The Joke Dr, a writing service/comedy class."

Jones is keeping himself busy as host of the popular OUTtv comedy Improv series *Tops and Bottoms*, while Michael sums up things nicely, "I'm working and loving it, the future is full of fun things, I just can't remember any of them right now."

Google Your Giggle

Danilea Saioni - www.thestandupsisters.com

Shelley Marshall - www.fullbawdycomedy.com

David C. Jones - www.davidcjones.ca

Martha Chaves - www.marthachaves.com

Darcy Michael - www.darcymichael.com

Ryan Steele - www.ryansteeshow.com

Jennie McNulty - www.thejokedr.com

Margaret Cho - www.margaretocho.com

Bryen Dunn is a freelance journalist based in Toronto with a focus on tourism, lifestyle, entertainment and community issues. He has written several travel articles and has an extensive portfolio of celebrity interviews with musicians, actors and other public personalities. He's willing to take on any assignments of interest, attend parties with free booze, listen to rants, and travel the world in search of the great unknown. He's eager to discover the new, remember the past, and look into the future.



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Our Opinion....



Mary-Margaret Jones: Dear Steven, Today, I decided to come out to you as my true self—a big ole flamey fag from the East Coast. Now, you might say “MMJ—you have tits and a vajayjay. You like snails and oysters. Plus, you’re from Northern Ontario. You can’t be a gay man from down east.” You’d be right: you’d be wrong, also.

Twenty years ago, when I did that whole coming out dance, I was hanging out with a gaggle of fags from the East Coast. They indoctrinate me in the ways of Codco. We watched new *Kids in the Hall*, singing “Running Faggot” loudly, and mimicing Buddy. Then, it was Lea Delaria (much better live). And it dawned on me. We of the queer variety are much funnier than the rest.

Steven Bereznai: One of the things I loved about *Kids In the Hall* was watching it with my brothers. There I was, closeted, and yet could bond with my bros over queer content. But I have to confess, as I’ve grown up, though I still love my kids, it’s women like Tina Fey, Kathy Griffin, and Amy Poehler who really put a stitch in my side.

Kathy G loves her gays, looked for them in the military in Iraq when she went to visit even before the repeal of DADT, and was hilarious doing it. She doesn’t believe in marriage (for anyone), makes fun

of gaybies (gays with babies), and has made a career out of being on the D-List. That’s tough to compete with, especially as we homos are such fame whores.

MMJ: Kathy Griffin is a walking talking gay male stereotype. Brash, loud, and a wee bit misogynistic, I submit she is more a big ole fag than straight girl.

SB: Exactly! But at the end of the day, she’s still a she, and I think that what really makes me connect with her is her underdog spirit, and she takes it and turns it around to be successful. I recall seeing comedian/actor Alec Mapa doing stand up, and saying that all the things that he got picked on for being when he was a kid (flamboyant, nelly, and yeah, a homo) is what he’s now making a living off of. So does coming from a place of (and I really hate using this word cause it harkens back to my university days when certain lingo got WAY overused) oppression make queers funnier than straights? If so, maybe it’s not so much a queer thing. We’ve already mentioned the Kathy Griffin’s of this world, but Chris Rock is also pretty damn hysterical in a “he did NOT just say that!” kind of way.

MMJ: Oppression is part of it, without doubt. Humour is a coping mechanism. So many people want to disappear but find they are front and centre. It’s just easier to “make ‘em laugh.”

and we have one!

by Steven Bereznai and Mary-Margaret Jones

This issue's topic: *Are queers funnier than heteros?*

SB: And of course there are some delightfully culturally specific sources of much guffaws. I love, love, love the YouTube sensation Sassy Gay Friend. Taking the age old gay best friend and combining it with the tragically comic works of William Shakespeare is sheer genius. "What are you doing, what are you doing, what, what, what are you doing?" If you haven't seen it, look it up!

MMJ: Love Sassy Gay Friend! Interestingly, the dykes of this world are never really considered funny in that sassy way.

SB: Why is that?

MMJ: Alas, there is that misconception that women-loving women are often too serious and political, to be funny. And, it wasn't long ago that *Vanity Fair* writer Christopher Hitchens—or as I like to call him, Douchebag—asserted that women aren't funny.

If sassy means "fresh" or "bold" then people really need to look up and see the plethora of great female comedians like Margaret Cho, Maggie Cassella, and Elvira Kurt who are just that. Sassy.

SB: Funny! When I was writing *Gay and Single... Forever?* I read a lot of relationships books about queers, and many of the therapist/experts agreed that lesbian couples could learn a lot from gay men by injecting humour into the conflicts they were

dealing with, and to lighten the mood already. However, the experts also said the gays could learn from the lesbians by not always turning to a joke, and being able to have an actual conversation about feelings—whatever those are.

MMJ: Wow Steven. If I didn't know better, I'd think that you'd never met a queer male couple. How many of them go "diva" on each other instantly when in conflict?

My point is—and I do have one (props to Ellen)—is that queer humour includes a greater spectrum than gays, lesbians, and homos as you have suggested. And remember, if it did only include those groups, it wouldn't include me. Comedians like Kathy Griffin, Mary Walsh, and Kevin McDonald might sleep with the opposite sex yet their humour, in its appeal and its intent, is queer.

Isn't that funny?

Mary-Margaret Jones is a long-time PR princess who lives in downtown Toronto. Her taste includes both snails and oysters.

Steven Bereznai is the author of the super hero novel *Queeroes*, and the dating bible *Gay and Single...Forever?*. His anthology contributions include *Second Person Queer*, *I Like It Like That*, and *Best Gay Love Stories 2010*. He can be reached online through his website www.stevenbereznai.com.



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Hot Artist:



Vong Sundara Cares about Comedy

by Scott MacDonald

I've heard it said that humour is the fastest way to change the world.

Laughing at ourselves, and others, makes our often stark realities a little more palatable and the plight of others a little more personal. And so it is for Canadian comic, humanitarian, and founder of Comedy Cares, Vong Sundara. Sundara believes that a hearty laughter is the perfect medium for delivering his message of pride in self and openness to others.

Born in a refugee camp in Thailand during political unrest, Sundara and his family moved to Winnipeg, Canada. "The area where I grew up, it's pretty much the hard-core Winnipeg ghetto," Sundara says with a laugh. "Most people don't

know this, but Winnipeg is the murder capital of Canada, it's pretty hard-core. I think a lot of my comedy comes from there and trying to adjust to life outside of Winnipeg."

After finishing high school Sundara moved to Calgary to study at the University there, where he spent many nights attending local stand-up shows. At that point, it was just a form of cheap entertainment and not something that Sundara was particularly drawn to.

"I got into comedy while organising for conferences in Calgary," Sundara adds matter-of-factly. "I was a part of the Calgary Out Games and there was a conference attached to that called Out Right. While doing speeches on human rights,



LOL!

'cause I'm a human rights guy, I was approached by an agent."

Sundara was quick to see the value of laughter as a medium to spread his message. "The human rights conferences were great because you have a captive audience. The reach of your message can only go so far though, because you're preaching to the converted. When I was in university," adds Sundara, "I was a member of the LGBT Group and they were passing around this petition for gay marriage, but they only got other gay people to sign it. That's sort of how I felt about giving speeches to other human rights activists. If you're putting your message into a funny form and performing it in front of people, someplace like Red Deer or Edmonton, you have a greater reach."

Sundara points out that he is more a human rights activist than a comic. "I try not to brand myself as a stand-up comedian," he says. "On my website — supercute.ca — I'm the official spokesperson for young, super-cute Asians, and actually I take that very seriously. I think so much of what I do is trying to give voice to the stories that I don't think have been told."

Unlike most who work alone in the bar scene, Sundara saw an opportunity for the community to come together, clean up its act and raise its profile. Thus was created, Comedy Cares, a non-profit organization that works with comics, corporations and charities to raise money for those in need. Not only does the organization raise money, but it will also help to bring his fellow wisecrackers exposure, and to garner respect for them within the Canadian entertainment industry and most importantly with new audiences.

Stand-up is the bad boy of the entertainment industry and it gets no respect, as the legendary Rodney Dangerfield used to say. "Canadian Comedy has sort of devolved to the lowest common denominator," says Sundara, who points

out that it's not really their fault. "Most comedy is at bars and clubs. Drunken people want to hear fart jokes. Comedy Cares is trying to elevate comedy to a greater level than fart jokes in a pub. If you're cutting your teeth by making fart jokes," Sundara says, while smiling, "you're going to have a pretty short career. Comedy Cares is really trying to create more opportunity for them."

Just as Sundara saw an opportunity to extend his humanitarian message through being funny, he believes he can extend comedies reach through humanitarianism. It seems to be a win/win situation

"I think because there's media coverage and because it's charity, it sort of forces the comedians to think about what they're saying, to write something specifically for the event, and to be more than just vulgar," adds Sundara. It gives them an opportunity to do material that might not work in the bar scene. "Vulgar comedy can be great, I'm not saying it's not, but it's always nice when you can clean it up."

"The last Comedy Cares Show, because of the *National Post's* involvement and the charity involvement, we are getting out a really different demographic of people." Sundara is obviously pleased as he tells of the fledgling organizations first big show, Laughter for Literacy, held just last October. "People were coming in like they were going to the opera, like full cape and gown and stuff. We had a jazz band when people were being seated, and full catering. It's sort of trying to elevate the role of comedy"

So, to whomever said that laughing could change the world, I'm pretty sure it's comics like Vong Sundara that you were talking about.



Scott MacDonald has an Advanced Diploma in Graphic Design from George Brown College and has studied acting with The Studio on the Drive in Vancouver and presently showcases his talents with Second City Toronto.

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Designing for fun

by Manny Machado

Life is too short to be taken seriously, the saying goes, and this is especially true when designing the interior of the space that you call your home. Many condo owners, who fall short of their expectations, such as first time property buyers, become disillusioned once they settle in and all documents and financial matters have been resolved. We rarely speak of the pressures that are associated with trying to create the perfect place. Our urban landscape is lined with flawless design shops, model suites and showrooms displaying desirable living environments that only a small percentage of people will successfully achieve.

The missing link between what the majority wants and what they get, is that they are trying to create someone else's isolated design, rather than taking inspiration from their own needs. Everyone has a specific requirement for where they reside. Passions and desires differentiate from person to person and

it's what makes us unique that creates the essence of where we want to live. When you look around your current abode, do you feel a connection to your daily items? Can your space tell the story of who you are and where you've been? Simple questions that can make a great impact on how you decorate and the very



same questions that a designer will ask you, in order to effectively get your digs into the state you desire. Knowing your own story will help make your dream home into a reality.

I met two very special people a few years ago that largely increased the value of my life when they opened their loft to me, inspiring me to make the move of expanding my business into Montréal. After almost a decade in a loving relationship that has seen its fair share of ups and downs, J.P. and Duarte recently redecorated their downtown apartment in Montréal after a tragic family loss. It was one of my most rewarding professional experiences to help two great friends refresh their home after such a traumatic event.

Both J.P. and Duarte have very strong creative impulses and their professions require their abode to also function as their workplace. J.P. is a figure skater and owner of The Montréal Ice Ballet, while Duarte is a hairstylist, business owner and creative guru. A

major factor in their décor is their desire to have a completely open concept. There is not a single dividing wall present, except of course, the bathroom. The area is just shy of 1,000 square feet, with 9 foot ceilings and is situated on the second floor of a 3-storey walk-up. Storage consists of one small built-in closet and the kitchen cabinetry.

Requirements: an office for J.P.; a hair station for Duarte; a bedroom, living room, dining room; enough space for their creativity to flourish along with their 3 small dogs, Becka, Gonzo and Brandy, to run around in.

Using the open concept as a benefit, the furniture has been laid out in such a way as to clearly identify each zone, while allowing them the freedom to change the placement at their discretion. One of my favourite elements is the 'surprise factor' of discovering where something has been moved or what's been changed



LOL!



around each time I visit. Sometimes it's subtle, such as the sectional moved from the left to right side of the sofa; other times it can be a complete transformation

that involves the bed in the middle of the loft and the living room in the corner niche where the bed once laid.

The color palette consists of a vibrant grass green, a warm earthy orange and a striking lemon yellow. After experimentation, the centre columns were finalized in a deep indigo. Each color not only identifies a zone, but also dramatically plays off the exposed brick walls and is repeated in the decorative accessories throughout.

I've asked them how often they change the layout and their reply was that something always gets moved when they vacuum. There is also a change in the mood of the apartment depending on the time of day: bright, airy and busy during daylight, while at night, a blanket of coziness fills the entire home.

Each section of the apartment gets used at one point of the day and holds special meaning to them both—J.P. and Duarte have trouble pinpointing any specific spot that is more favoured than the other. Their dwelling is a gleaming example of how two personalities are reflected in one living environment, which not only saturates the inhabitants with imagination and creativity, but those lucky enough to visit.

To walk around their condo is akin to a whimsical tour of their minds. One such feature is Duarte's passion for hairstyling, as reflected in the collection of Barbie dolls prominently on display, started before he was old enough to use a pair of scissors. Over the years, they have acquired a number of decorative items originally intended for, or inspired by, one of J.P.'s successful ice shows, but nothing defines his skating past more than the white oval dining table illuminated by a green chandelier. The entire place is filled with conversation pieces. My favourite is found in

the centre of the room, where a beautiful figurine of a merman stands vigil over a large aquarium that serves as the habitat to a variety of fish.

Knowing what makes them happy has allowed these young, creative and fun entrepreneurs to build a home that continues to inspire their vibrant personalities. Their design has grown from their personal needs and expression, allowing them to reinvent their environment and grow it with the changes of their lives, truly making it an extension of themselves.

All actions, including the decorating of your space, should start with one thing: intention. Know what you want before you act. This will help alleviate unnecessary stress and make the process you undertake a lot more enjoyable. Use the resources available such as magazines, the internet, and personal consultations with the professionals, to guide you through the development of your renovation. Use what you love, display items that have impact on your life and hold special meaning to define your living area. Lastly, don't try to duplicate someone else's inaccessible designs. Rather, tailor a remote concept to fit your needs and if all else fails, make it up. Design is not about perfection, it's about perception. Go ahead, break the rules! Enjoy your space, 'cause you're the one that has to live in it.

Manny Machado has been working in the design industry since 2004. Renowned for his diversity and broad range of styles, he has transformed some of the most impossible spaces into inspiring and comfortable homes. For more information on how to revolutionize your interiors, visit him at www.mannymachado.com.

Photography by Bora Tarhan



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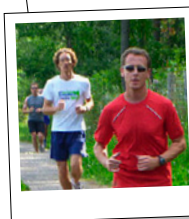
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BORN THIS WAY

a memoir by Richard Ryder

So, I recently ran into someone I went to public school with. Too bad I wasn't in a car at the time. It was one of the many kids who'd made public education hell for me. They'd seen me on TV recently (yeah, that's right biatch!) doing stand up and now there I was, years later, on the subway, ignoring the despair by trying to imagine myself anywhere other than underground in a metal tube. It was

too much for him. He

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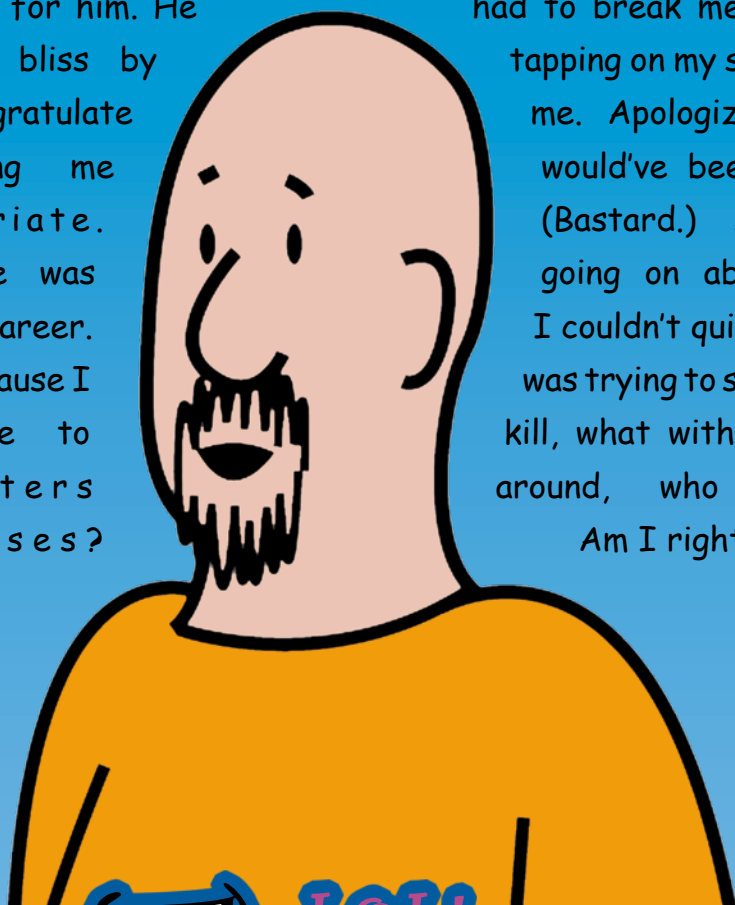
I couldn't quite make

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around, who needs

Am I right?



LOL!

"I don't remember you being funny", this hellion from high school said. Of course you don't! Why would you? It's hard to hear the punch lines when you're chasing someone through a field, trying to give them a few 'punch lines' of their own... I wanted to yell: It gets better, my ass! What about when it gets bitter? Revenge! ...but I digress. The troglodyte had a point. Was I always funny or was it something I learned?

At this point I'd like to make it clear that I always knew I was gay, even at a young age. I knew I was gay way before I even knew I was funny. But in my defense, it was the '80s, which in retrospect, were pretty gay! All that hairspray and eyeliner,

wasn't a power failure, TV was always there for me. Waiting with open arms were Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball and Dick van Dyke, all the greats (I still can't believe that Dick and Dyke made it onto TV all those years ago), who made shut-ins like me laugh through the tears. Maybe that was it. Being shunt from teenage life forced me to learn comedy 101 from the pros. Would I have had such a thorough education in comedy if I'd been popular and busy? And, like my grandmother, my comedy gurus were women. Would I have cared to hear what these phenomenally talented females had to say if I'd been straight? But in the mad world of bullies and haters of the late '70s,

I THINK MY SEXUAL DESTINY WAS SEALED WHEN MY MOTHER NAMED ME RICHARD RYDER, WHICH JUST SHORTENED RIGHT DOWN TO DICK RYDER...

hello? Duran Duran? George Michael? The Go-Go's? Who did they think they were? Regardless, I think my sexual destiny was sealed when my mother named me Richard Ryder, which just shortened right down to Dick Ryder for every single person I ever went to school with. Guess who the fag was? That would be me. (Bastards.) Thank God I was practically born 6'4", which helped keep the haters at bay... to a point. It also explains the expression my mother has had on her face ever since. On quiet nights you can still hear her calling for an epidural which explains why that was my first word. Anyway...

Being a pariah in public school didn't help me develop social skills until after high school. I was completely ignored by friends and family. Well I didn't have friends, no point splitting hairs; it's hard to miss what you didn't have. Actually, that's not entirely true; I did have two very good friends: TV and my grandmother. As long as there

women were my protectors. Even if they didn't like me they made sure I was safe, which totally made recess a less stressful experience, let me tell you!

But all this early comedy training hadn't bubbled forth in my day to day existence yet, probably because that existence was cluttered with a lot of running away from the hateful hordes. So it steeped deep within me waiting for its inevitable release. It wasn't too long before I discovered theatre. Did I mention I was gay? My grandmother, my only other friend and the joy to my world, my greatest protector and the reason I am who I am today, used to take my brother and I to see plays all the time. Whether it was community theatre or a production for kids at the local library, I'm sure I've seen every fairytale live on stage thanks to my Grandmother. So it was inevitable that I would end up on a path to the stage. But community theatre and acting

classes didn't coax the comedy out of me. Just the opposite in fact. That audience breathing in the dark scared the poop out of me! So I retreated deeper in my comedy closet, refusing to draw attention to myself. Whoever said there was a forth wall in theatre, lied. (Bastard.)

It was while I was sweating it out in the chorus that I was introduced to Improvisation, the lazy person's theatre. Now I know that some of you feel that Improv has become the mime of the new millennium, but back in the early '80s it was a breath of fresh air. No scripts, no rehearsals, just actors on a stage taking suggestions from

old donkey at anything that I thought was funny, which explains why my mother made me watch TV in another room. But Improv solved that. Nothing makes you sink or swim better than getting wet and the way you get wet in Improv is to stand on stage in front of an audience with no script to save you. The first time I made people laugh I was in an Improv class. I can't tell you what the scene was we were doing, mostly because it was being made up as we went along, never to be repeated, but I can tell you how that laughter felt. It felt how I imagined being popular felt. All of a sudden I had friends. People talked to me

NOTHING MAKES YOU SINK OR SWIM BETTER THAN GETTING WET AND THE WAY YOU GET WET IN IMPROV IS TO STAND ON STAGE IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE WITH NO SCRIPT TO SAVE YOU.

the audience and creating content with it. Sure sometimes it missed the mark, but Improv is a very unifying experience for both the actors and the audience. Those watching feel part of the show because their suggestions are helping shape plot lines. Most importantly for me, it forced me to interact with the audience. It made me rely on them and stop being afraid of them as if they were lurking in the dark ready to pounce. Instead, these audiences were lurking in the dark waiting to laugh. And boy did they! It was a huge revelation for me to stand on a stage and talk to an audience. My first hurdle on the comedy course was cleared. Fear of being on stage fell away from me like a cheap costume on a stripper at Remington's. (What? No tip?)

The second hurdle for me was trust...of myself. I didn't know if I was capable of being funny. I knew I liked funny. I laughed like a big

and invited me out for after class coffees. I was popular...and hooked.

Those years performing and chatting with like minded theatre geeks helped me tap into my funny. I learned to listen. I learned timing. Being funny was my gateway drug. I started performing more and more. I even joined an Improv troupe—it was fabulous until one of my new Improv friends took me to a comedy club.

She had been secretly doing stand up at open mic rooms around the city, unbeknownst to our Improv coterie. You have to know this before I continue: Improv comics hate stand up comics. Don't ask me why. It boils down to grandness. Stand up comics perform alone. They don't share the spotlight. I think the Improv comics are jealous. (Sissies.)

Anyway, off to the comedy club I went, crossing



LOL!

to the dark side with my fellow defector. I loved it. Stand up spoke to me. It involved all the tools of Improv, but without other actors screwing it up. Comedy is about timing but let me assure you a room full of Improv comics don't sync up over time like women can. Just 'cause you work together doesn't mean you can perform together. It's not all standing ovations and flowers in the Improv arena. But stand-up comedy is different. You write it alone, you develop the jokes alone and you go onstage to perform it...alone. If that audience doesn't like your act, they're as much as saying they don't like you! Well, all I can say is they liked me, they really liked me!

Almost right out of the gate I did well at stand-up. Improv had helped me overcome my fear of an audience. In fact I embraced them, made them part of the act. There was no fear. Public school's years of torment were far worse than anything a comedy audience could throw at me. In fact I remember a couple of years later before a show, I came across another gay comic who was getting ready for his set. Like me, he was fairly new to stand-up but not new to being gay. He wasn't a twink is what I'm saying. Anyway he was in the bathroom sweating buckets, and not for the usual reasons gay men sweat in bathrooms. (Dirty!) He was nervous about going on stage and full in the throes of 'flop' sweat. So I asked him what the problem was. He said he was scared to go onstage in front of all those straight people. He was convinced they would hate him because he was gay. 'Are you kidding?' I asked. 'We're gay survivors of public school. That audience can't possibly say anything worse than anything you heard on the schoolyard.' I don't know how much

that helped in the long run (that guy has since quit comedy and entered into the wonderful world of selling real estate--yep, no humour there!), but at the time, I could see that it helped him get over that initial fear so he could get up on that stage.

That said, I think gays are built better for comedy, well at least the lesbians are: Rosie O'Donnell, Ellen DeGeneres, Wanda Sykes and depending on what day of the week you're talking to her, Margaret Cho. Gays have faced adversity for centuries and have long been the observers to our straight dominated world. How else do you think we came up with ways to pretty it up? If

we're gonna watch the straights, they gotsta be pretty! I feel I'm a much better comic because I'm gay—I'm certainly more interesting. Have you ever heard a straight guy talk? For more than 20 minutes? I rest my case. I was in my element. I was finding my funny and taking it with me on stage. Now all that was left for me to do was to come out of the closet and let my

family know I was on the comedy road to funny town. Can you imagine having to come out of the closet—again—but this time as a comic? My poor mother! It's one thing to have a gay son, but to have a gay son that's also a stand-up comic? Well, all I can say is, it wasn't pretty. So after a lot of screaming and yelling and a 20-year period of self-discovery, I can proudly say, where comedy is concerned that baby, I was born this way! Damn you Gaga and your timely hits!

Richard Ryder can be seen weekly on OUTtv and heard daily on 103.9 PROUD FM's Your Morning With Richard and Chris, where he dishes the dirt and judges the judgeable from 6 to 10am. It's the best way to start the day! Honest. (Seriously, if he has to get up that early, so should everyone else!)

**'ARE YOU KIDDING?' I ASKED.
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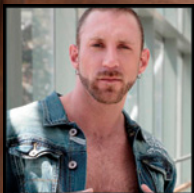
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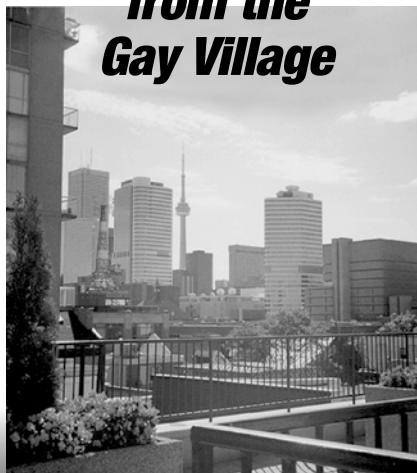
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SPRING IN THE CITY

by Ricky Boudreau



Spring

A sense of warmth is tapping at the door;
And hope, a feeling out from distant lore
— Or so it seems — clears the deep refrain!

Emerging youth: a dormant lea awakes.
The raging colour, singing loud, partakes
In annual birth — spring is born again!

A zest anew for nascent life
Begins in floral train:
Carriage one: a snowdrop thrill;
Carriage two: the crocus;
Number three, a daffodil — dancing,
Drawing focus — as she would,
Attention seeker!

How I love our spring:
The bold and sleeker feel I get,
An inner glow, a ring!
I've paid the chilly winter's debt, so
Now upon the wing!

—Mark R. Slaughter (2010)

The warmer weather is finally upon us—time for spring cleaning! It's fantastic to get to dusting away the cobwebs, pulling back the curtains, opening the windows and letting in the light and fresh air, after months of hibernating. It's the perfect time to really clean out every nook and cranny of my home. This marks the time of year where I change my wardrobe. I love going through my clothes and donating the things I didn't wear to Goodwill and making room for all the things I may buy for myself. If you are like me, as the weather improves, it makes me want to shop, be outside and hang out on patios drinking with friends. Spring is the time where I get my rollerblades out of storage and head on down to the lake to take in the first warm rays of the season. It not only works off all the extra pounds I have accumulated, but it also allows me to witness the beauty of Mother Nature erupting all around me. Young chicks are hatched and flowers are poking through the soil. It feels so good getting out more and taking advantage of the warmer weather and the longer days, especially after being cooped up inside all winter. The sun makes everyone happy.

It's exciting to think about all of the activities I can do with my friends and family that help me keep my girlish figure in check. After all, I would like to don a bathing suit at some point—cause girl, mama wants



LOL!

to look and feel good. Pride isn't too far away! I love being able to go out without having to take an extra 10 minutes to put on my heavy winter coat, scarf, gloves and boots. It's always strange to go out without a coat for the first time, I always feel like I've forgotten something.

Toronto starts to come to life again with plenty of things to do. In the words of Oprah, it's really important to start living your best life. I've listed some great things that I will be doing and I hope you like them too—be sure to say HI if you see me gadding about. Stay happy, healthy and positive and the rest will follow. Have a great spring and I'll see you in the next issue...

Food & Festivals

8th Annual May Festival of Chefs

Saturdays & Sundays

May 1 – 29

\$5.00

Cheese Boutique

45 Ripley Ave.

416.762.6292

www.cheeseboutique.com

Back for its 8th year, this festival of chefs involves 10 great chefs from around our city and perhaps some of your favourite places to eat. With a \$5 donation, which goes to support the Famous People Players scholarship fund, you get a glass of wine and a sample dish. This year includes chefs like Rob Gentile from Buca and Grant Van Gameren from the Black Hoof.

TIP: A great first date option.

Luminato

June 10 – 19

Various locations in Toronto

FREE

www.luminato.com

Filled with lots of free events, Luminato takes place over 10 days in the city and leads right up into Pride. This festival is a multi-disciplinary celebration of dance, music, visual arts, fashion, food, film and more. This year marks another great happening here in our city to celebrate Toronto's diversity.

TIP: Take hold of your summer, don some sequins and dance through the streets.

Salut Toronto Wine and Food Festival

May 5 – 18

Daily all day & evening

Various locations

647.827.1705

www.salutwinefestival.com

This great wine and food festival offers tasty treats from



the finest local ingredients from Ontario and beyond. There are amazing, top quality wine tastings, special restaurant deals and other city wide events.

TIP: Take some time to map out what you are going to do.

Good Food Festival & Market

April 29 – May 1

International Centre

6900 Airport Rd. at Derry Rd.

www.goodfoodfestival.com

If you love food like I do, then this is worth checking out. There will be plenty of delicious dishes to sample from local suppliers in the "The Market" as well as a cornucopia of ethnic foods to try. There are contests that you can enter too, like Best Homemade Pizza.

TIP: Go super hungry and with a friend who has a car.

Oh So Gay

Billy Elliot the Musical

Ongoing

Tuesdays 7pm

Wed to Sun 7:30pm

Matinees Wed, Sat, Sun 1:30pm

Canon Theatre

244 Victoria St.

Tickets \$40 - \$200

www.mirvish.com

Toronto's theatre scene is vibrant and strong as it premiere's Broadway's number one show is here in city. This show has won 10 Tony Awards in 2009 including Best Musical. It's a great musical with amazing talent and suitable for anyone, so bring the family.

TIP: Going to see this musical just may lead you to sign up for a dance class.

Stars on Ice

April 29th

7:30pm

Air Canada Centre

50 Bay St.

Tickets \$25 - \$150

www.theaircanadacentre.com

If you love figure skating, then you need to go check out some amazing talent and stare at some HOT butts! This is the 21st season of the show and will showcase the grace, speed and athleticism of Kurt Browning, 2010 Olympic Bronze Medalist Joannie Rochette and 2010 Olympic Gold Medalists Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir.

TIP: *Bring that camera for those great butt shots!*

Glee Live! In Concert!

June 11

Air Canada Centre

50 Bay St.

\$89.50 and up

www.theaircanadacentre.com

Whether you are a "Glee" or not, this concert is a must see. The live performances will include some of the show's most memorable moments, like "Empire State of Mind," "Toxic" and "Don't Stop Believin'."

TIP: *Brush up on your favourite Glee episodes so you can sing along.*



Artsy Things

Life as a Legend: Marilyn Monroe

Until May 15th

The McMichael Gallery

10365 Islington Ave, Kleinburg

Tix: \$15 Adults - \$12 Seniors & Students

905.893.1121

www.mcmichael.com

This is a touring exhibition featuring about 150 works from artists, including Douglas Kirkland, Richard Avedon and Andy Warhol. It delves into the life of Norma Jean Baker, the mythology of Marilyn Monroe and her affect on our culture.

TIP: *Why not go, dressed as Marilyn, rocking the red lip and winged out liner!*

Open Mic Comedy Wednesdays

Spirit Bar and Grill

642 Church St.

416.967.0001 for reservations

www.spiritsbarandgrill.com

Come on in and get your laugh on and while enjoying a couple of pints. You may be privy to the next rising comedy star. After all, laughter is the best medicine.

TIP: *A great place to wrap up your "hump day."*

Artisans at the Distillery: Spring Craft Show

Victoria Day weekend, May 21 – 23

Daily 11am – 6pm

55 Mill St.

FREE

Artisans gather here in the famous Distillery District two times a year for a wonderful craft show. Artisans from all over bring their wares to showcase and sell. It makes for a great afternoon with friends and shopping outside. There are several places to pick up lunch as well. Don't forget your sunscreen!

TIP: *Did you know that by 1877, the Gooderham and Worts Distillery had become the largest one in the world?*



LOL!



One More Thing

Rihanna: Loud Tour

June 7

7:30pm

Air Canada Centre

50 Bay St.

Tickets \$20 - \$250

Rihanna is bringing her highly anticipated *Loud* tour to Toronto. Her fifth album release since 2005, it has reached number one in six countries. No wonder she's our "Only Girl in the World."

TIP: Buy the CD beforehand and get loud and rock out to Rihanna in your living room.

Joan Rivers

May 16

7:30pm

Massey Hall

178 Victoria St.

Tickets \$35 - \$85

www.masseyhall.com

Gay Icon, Joan Rivers, is in town for one night only. She was once the hottest thing in show biz—Johnny Carson's replacement, Mother, comedienne extraordinaire, jewellery seller and comeback queen. Check her out live and in person, she will not disappoint you.

TIP: A great evening to share with friends.

Martha Stewart

June 6

7:30pm

Massey Hall

178 Victoria St.

Tickets \$42 - \$90

www.masseyhall.com

Martha Stewart has created an empire for herself. Style guru for entertaining, home décor, craft diva, the Emmy award winner will share her ideas and creative principals that have helped her create the Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia franchise.

TIP: Bring something to take notes with, 'cuz you know she'll have awesome suggestions.

Maya Angelou

May 25

7:30pm

Massey Hall

178 Victoria St.

Tickets \$40 - \$95

www.masseyhall.com

The one and only is coming to our fair city for one show only. She has been a source of inspiration for millions of people around the world including Oprah. An Evening with Dr. Maya Angelou will be a night that you won't soon forget.

TIP: This would make a great Mother's day gift.

Ricky Boudreau blossomed as a true social butterfly while traveling the world as a professional figure skater for 15 years. He loves the gift of the gab and discovering great events in the city. With an appreciation for culture, great food and beauty, Ricky spends his time very creatively as a professional make-up artist for MAC Pro cosmetics. He has helped artists like Deborah Cox and Dame Shirley Bassey look gorgeous. Hear of a new hot spot? Email him at inthecity@pinkplaymags.com

Photos by James McKay



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From the Heart

by Shelley A. Harrison



From
Bleak
to
Bliss



Sometimes life is not very funny. Rather, it can be downright hard. Good **S**old human suffering. The cement shoes to your helium balloon of inspiration, awe, and exuberance. Unless you have attained the ultimate goal of full awakening or enlightenment (see Eckhart Tolle for a modern, Western version of same), you have suffering. It just comes with the wardrobe.

However, you can kick suffering's butt. One word: Muppets. Ok, if *Fraggle Rock* or Gonzo don't do it for you, try *South Park* for the crass, *Calvin and Hobbes* comics for the nostalgic, Margaret Cho for the bawdy, Weird Al Yankovic for the geeky (can you tell I grew up in the '80s), or a comedy club for the rowdy. Go rent your favourite funny movies—British humour, dry humour, black humour, slapstick, or light hearted. Just do it on purpose, even if you don't feel like it.

I'm in the middle of a gruesome breakup—I'm talking marriage offers were on the table people, and I have been some single for some long time—and I found myself at a comedy club with my colleagues from the massage clinic where I work. My beau should have been on my arm, along with all the

other lovely couples, but there I was bubbling over with mirth at the great jokes, in complete disrespect to my grief. Even when your laughter feels somewhat false because deep down you are distracted by your SUFFERING, it still has a physical and chemical effect of lightening you up and engendering a "what the hay" attitude. Might as well see the humour in life, or at least that it still exists out there to be participated in when you are not totally preoccupied with your SUFFERING.

If you are so depressed that you have become a shut-in and you can't handle in-person contact anymore, go viral. Let's face it people—God gave us YouTube for a reason. He understands our modern needs. If living in virtual reality has taken the warmth of direct contact out of your human relating

and dating take a YouTube holiday. You can even do the *Reader's Digest* version—literally. The magazine just published an article on humour and posted a bunch of fave YouTube videos. Check 'em out at www.readersdigest.ca/March.

If fuzzy blue monsters and petty laughs are just too silly for you, then here is your second line of defense: get high. I'm not talking drug high. Lame and pricey. That's numbing out and the high you get cruds up your body and energy field so much you get an overall low in the long run. It's depleting, gives you early wrinkles, and eats into your anti-oxidant supply...which gives you those early wrinkles. I'm talkin' Spirit high. Just about every spiritual tradition out there has very exacting techniques and technologies for entering you into the bliss zone. Sufis do the whirling dirvish (never tried it, so you'll have to do the research on that yourself). The Sheikh tradition produced Yogi Bhanan, who brought Kundalini Yoga to the West. Look for it in yoga centres. You can stir up your energy through the intense breathing, vibration inducing mantra chanting and dynamic yoga movements. It can feel kinda loony if you haven't chanted in the Gurmukhi language before, but get over it. We're accessing a bit of \$15 heaven in an-hour-and-a-half. And it works. I'll never forget the morning I first practiced a Kundalini Yoga set, and got told later that day that I looked younger. This was in the middle of a tree-planting bush camp: 5 hours of sleep, 12 hour days that started at 5am, slogging around in the clear-cut wilderness sticking trees in the dirt. Does it create radiance? Seems so!

If you are Christian, maybe forgo the sedate Sunday service and visit a Gospel Church, or seek out Christians who work with shaking medicine. The Shakers, for example, allow the vibration of spirit and the cosmos itself to move through them, taking them into ecstatic states of dissolution and release. (www.shakingmedicine.com)

If you are a nature-lover, shamanic work will alter your reality. Life just looked a little bit different the first time I sat in a powerful sweat lodge and had an eagle wing dusting accumulated angst off of my body...except no human hand was actually holding the wing. Yes folks, miracles and spirit phenomena do happen. Most indigenous traditions, especially the African, shrug off the weariness of substance through community drumming and dance. Get your soul groovin' in a drum, dance, or Five

Rhythms workshop and sweat your prayers. (www.gabrielleroth.com)

And the piece de resistance? A direct shot to the brain of awakening...the Oneness Blessing. Yes siree! I just attended a weekend workshop to be initiated to pass the Blessing, called *deeksha* in the Indian Sanskrit language. This beautiful gift, straight from the Source, causes a neurobiological shift in the brain that moves it towards the state that an awakened person functions in. It's a cumulative process, meaning the more you receive the blessing, the more shift happens. Shift people, not shit. Some recipients feel a deep silence, or a general calming and relaxing, others go into high states of consciousness and bliss right off the bat. In addition, the Oneness teachings include powerful meditations and processes that blast the suffering right out of you. One meditation we did with breath and mantra, got so much *shakti* moving up into our heads, that half of the room burst into tears (oh hell, get that crap outta the way of your causeless joy!), or into uncontrollable peals of laughter. It didn't happen to me until the second morning we did it, but it was the rollicking laughter for me baby! Causeless goofiness. I walked away from the weekend intensive starry-eyed and really haven't come back down to the level that used to be the norm for me. In addition, you can learn to give the blessing, and be an asset to society rather than a morose drag. (www.onenessuniversity.org)

So, like the world's most notorious grouch—the Grinch—if your heart has been “two sizes too small” for too long, get yourself hooked up to the jumper cables of human consciousness raising. If you start running through your day trumpeting your joy with a big sappy smile, don't say I didn't warn you. There's a reason why saffron robe clad monks smile and giggle frequently. So, whether you go for the lowbrow laughs or the high octane highs, there's a lot of joy out there to be had. Go get some.

Shelley A. Harrison is an Energy Healer in Ottawa. She graduated from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing 4-year professional training and has been working in private practice for 10 years. She visits Toronto regularly to see clients and visit her brother, Jeff, the editor of this magazine. You can write Shelley at fromtheheart@pinkplaymags.com or visit her at www.doveheart.ca.



LOL!

Spring Horoscopes

by Lawrence Grecco

ARIES (Mar 21-Apr 19) Those of you who were born in the early part of Aries are about to undergo some profound and exciting changes as Uranus springs into your sign. At this time you're asked to focus on yourself and get clearer on who you are and how you want your life to be. Take care to look before you leap and take special care to revisit and revise your priorities as you notice one or two major aspects of your life undergoing a top to bottom transformation.

TAURUS (Apr 20-May 20) What may feel like laziness or inertia is really just a period of time where you are asked to rest, to turn within and to rejuvenate before you're ready to spring back out into the world. Any ambiguity or mystery with regard to your career path or your overall direction in life is about to evolve into a state of inspiration and faith in what your life should be about. Take a leap of faith and don't worry about being so practical all the time.

GEMINI (May 21-Jun 20) It's all about friends, friends, friends right now. You just can't get enough of being out and about and it's as if people are naturally gravitating to you from all kinds of unlikely places. There are some innovative, diverse and interesting people on their way into your life and it's a wonderful time to consider getting more involved with a political, social, or spiritual cause.

CANCER (Jun 21-Jul 22) It's as if all of your efforts and hard work over the past year are finally starting to pay off: you are receiving a high degree of recognition and appreciation on a larger scale than usual. Your home life is under scrutiny these days as you carefully consider your surroundings and how they ought to be. Family matters also figure prominently now.

LEO (Jul 23-Aug 22) This is one of the most optimistic and exciting periods for you in a long time. Your desire to travel and be a student of life are at an all-time high. There is a natural curiosity brewing inside of you that wants to get more in touch with your life's purpose, either through a new educational experience or a deepening of your spirituality. Either way, you're about to rediscover yourself in a brand new way.

VIRGO (Aug 23-Sept 22) You are at a point in your life where you just can't settle for anything less than a deep, authentic, all or nothing experience. This applies to your career, your relationships and your overall approach to everything and everyone around you. Finances figure in prominently right now as you may have to deal with credit, loans, or tax issues. The awareness you have right now about money and practical matters will be to your benefit in the long run.

LIBRA (Sept 23-Oct 22) Everyone knows that you're nothing if not relationship oriented, but at the moment your love of people and your devotion to your significant other (or best friend) is at an all time high! There is a very prominent configuration of planets in your relationship sector—so you're being called upon to devote a lot of time and energy to other people right now. This comes naturally to Libra so it's nothing you can't handle and in fact you'll only grow from the experience!

SCORPIO (Oct 23-Nov 21) You find yourself paying close attention to your current job and how your daily routine works (or doesn't work) for you these days. It's a wonderful time to begin a new health regimen and to get a good, clear sense of the state of your body and mind. Notice your diet, take stock of how you feel, and use this time to work on improving whatever feels "off" whether it be physically or mentally. You'll emerge stronger and healthier than ever!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 22-Dec 21) There is a wonderful emphasis on creativity, which is inspiring you to pursue an artistic endeavour that's been on your mind for a while now. This same energy also makes you quite amorous and children may even figure into this symbolism in some way. You are getting very clear on what kinds of people you want to be surrounded by and what causes make the most sense for you as well.

CAPRICORN (Dec 22-Jan 19) There is a huge emphasis this spring on matters of home and family—not just where you live but how it should look and feel. You are also witness to some profound and interesting changes taking place with regard to your family and your sense of family and much of your time and energy is being spent on sorting through family matters. It's an exciting opportunity for you to have a fresh new start in all aspects of your life, so take advantage of the wind behind your back and move forward!

AQUARIUS (Jan 20-Feb 18) Don't be surprised if you feel like reading more books than usual, writing a poem or two, or tackling a new subject. The emphasis at this time in your life is to learn, explore, ask questions, and discuss, discuss, discuss your ideas with others. Siblings may be in the picture more than usual and your finances may take an unexpected turn for the better.

PISCES (Feb 19-Mar 20) Your finances are going through an unexpectedly positive transformation at the moment—the way you earn money and what you do with it is changing in a very exciting way. Take care of what you own, take stock of your assets, and get clear on your innate talents and abilities and be sure not to squander them. Learn to turn your interests into your passion and a way of serving humankind.

Lawrence Grecco is a professional astrologer and Zen Life Coach in New York City. He is a seminary student with a Korean Zen order and a member of the board of directors of the National Council of Geocosmic Research, NYC chapter. He is available for personal readings and can be reached at lawrence.grecco@gmail.com, or visit his web site at www.zenrising.com.

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Elvira Kurt

I didn't actually come 'out' on stage

until the first show I ever did for a gay audience, which was at U of T's Convocation Hall in 1991. I was asked to open for the Funny Gay Males (Bob Smith, Danny McWilliams and Jaffe Cohen). I don't recall thinking about wanting to come 'out' on stage or how I might come 'out' on stage, it just happened. A few minutes into my usual act, I blurted it out.

Until then, my early days of stand-up, the first bunch of years in fact, were closeted days just like the rest of my life at the time. Coming 'out' in my act was due to a confluence of events in my life: I was finally old enough (pushing 30) to stop caring what people thought; I was with someone I cared for enough to want to stop lying about it once and for all; I was hired by Second City and my castmates, who were among the first people I came out to, who were perfectly fine with the news. The biggie, however, was telling my parents. Their *massive* freak-out made me realize that telling anyone

after telling them (like, say, a room full of strangers in a comedy club) was going to be a picnic by comparison.

So, on stage, there it was. I got a huge round of applause and it felt so great, like crazy-great! As if I'd just been freed from a burden I didn't know I was carrying. In that instant, my whole act changed—not just the material, but my delivery, my style of performing. It was like beginning all over again, but better because I already had so many years of stage time under my belt, so it was more that I was now able to talk about things I hadn't dared to before. Being honest about who I was on stage, opened up my entire real life as a source of material and I got to examine my life as it really was and not as I was pretending it was. It made a huge difference.

Elvira Kurt hosted the TV shows *Popcultured* and *Adventures in Comedy* and appears regularly on CBC Radio's Q. A winner of numerous comedy awards, she's written material for Ellen Degeneres and *This Hour has 22 Minutes*. She lives in Toronto with her partner Chloë and their two children.

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