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HOTTER THAN JULY

Meet the Creative Team Behind This Year's Events

THE INTERVIEW

'The Voice' Alum Davon Fleming on Healing in the Spirit of Love

PLUS

How Two Local Ballroom Godmothers Found Resiliency In Their Grief

LENDALE JOHNSON STANDS & DELIVERS

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Photo: (Left) Armando Espitia and Christian Vazquez star as gay Mexican immigrants in "I Carry You With Me," a film made by documentarian Heidi Ewing, a Farmington Hills native (right).

ONLY ON PRIDESOURCE.COM

Heidi Ewing Found Her Passion for Film as a Kid in Farmington Hills. Now, Her Gay Immigration Drama Is Winning Awards

By Jason A. Michael

Leyna Bloom Makes History: 2021 Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue Features Trans Model on Cover

By Jason A. Michael

Parting Glances: Henry Ford Village Pride

By Charles Alexander

Love Wins Big in Small-Town Holly's First Pride

By Crystal A. Proxmire

5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

This far into summer, beating the heat isn't the issue — it's learning how to have fun again after spending too much time in isolation last year. Whether you're finally ready to invite friends to a viewing party, see a show or simply enjoy some more alone time, here's a list of five LGBTQ-friendly things to do that won't disappoint.

Roll for Gay Initiative

At 7 p.m. July 28, LGBTQ+ community center Southwest Michigan OutCenter will transform into a virtual tavern calling all manner of wizards, fighters, rogues and every Dungeons & Dragons class in between to try their hand at saving the Mines of Phandelver. And since the virtual session's being hosted by OutCenter, openly LGBTQ+ characters are to be expected and welcomed (looking at you, bards). Is there a mod for inclusivity?

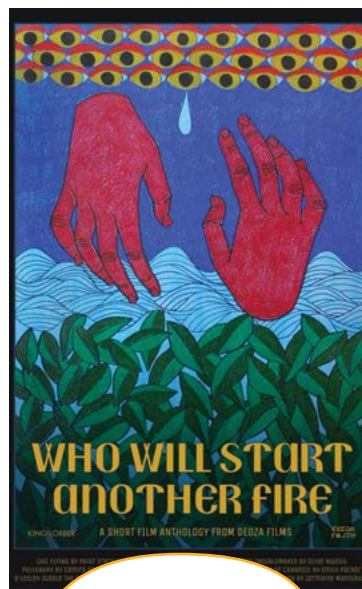
To register as a player fill out the form here: <http://ow.ly/Bklc50FcTje>. Email Alex@outcenter.org with the subject heading "Teen Pride D&D" with any questions.



Take in Some Tunes With the Fam

They say those in the LGBTQ+ community march to the beat of their own drums. Now, that can happen literally. Well, I guess there's no marching. There are drums, though. Holland's Out On The Lakeshore LGBTQ+ community center is partnering with Avalon Music Academy to round off the end of July with a community drum circle. The Academy will provide instruments to those who don't have their own and encourage everyone who is interested to stop by for the guided family event.

It will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. July 28 in Holland's Prospect Park. Visit [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com) to register for this free event.



Catch These Nine Short Stories

Brush up on some soon-to-be movie history with Cinema Detroit's feature of "Who Will Start Another Fire." This anthology film features nine short stories created by emerging directors who are Black, Indigenous, people of color, women and those in the LGBTQ+ community. Paula Guthat, who is the co-founder and CEO of Cinema Detroit, says the film offers "fresh and intriguing perspectives." "It struck me, as I watched, that each film deals in some way with the past, whether it's not-so-happy childhoods, lingering relationships or time that folds in on itself. What they lack in budget, they make up for in resonance and ingenuity," Guthat told Between The Lines. "Each is rewarding viewing in its own way, and I'm certain that we'll see more from all of these filmmakers."

Rent the film online for \$10 at [Cinema Detroit's website](https://www.cinematodetroit.com).

Absorb Some Good Jason Mraz Vibes

In a year that seemed to compound the bad, Jason Mraz beat the odds and looked for the good. Michiganders will get to witness that positivity in action as Mraz visits the state on Sunday, Aug. 8 at the Meadow Brook Ampitheatre to tour his latest album, "Look for the Good." In an interview with Between The Lines, Mraz, who is bisexual, talked about rising up against homophobia despite the odds: "How can I look for the good in 2020? How can I look for the good in my past?" he said. "And I knew I needed to figure out: How can I look for the good in the trauma of my high school bullies?"

Learn more at 313presents.com and read the full interview at Pridesource.com.



Photo: Jen Rosenstein



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Honor an HIV Activist

Move over, Beatles. Once called the first lady of the 1960s "British invasion" of pop culture, Grammy winner Petula Clark has had a lasting impact on music ever since. Fans of the longtime anti-HIV/AIDS activist and entertainer won't want to miss "What Would Petula Do?" The show tracks the star's rise from the 1940s to her raucous mega stardom in the '60s. It goes all the way through the 1990s, when she was at the height of her Broadway and film career.

See "What Would Petula Do?" on July 31 at Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Hills. Buy tickets, starting at \$60, online at cabaret313.org.

MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM BEHIND THIS YEAR'S *Hotter Than July*



From left to right: Kyra Sanders, Lillith Jackson and Mykell Price, the team who helped make HTJ happen this year. Photos: Andrew Potter

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

The past 18 or so months have seen major disruption in our daily lives including the cancelation or virtualization of community events celebrating Pride. Detroit's Hotter Than July (HTJ), the country's longest running Black LGBTQ+ Pride celebration, is no exception. The majority of the event will be virtual, but not to worry. It'll still be hot.

According to a statement from LGBT Detroit, "The structure of the event itself is a model of care and concern in the wake of COVID-19 by offering hybrid digital and in-person activities that condense the usual events and decrease the risks of COVID-19 exposure to the Black LGBTQ+ community and the public while maintaining HTJ's historic liberatory spirit. While the approach may be different, the rationales and strategies are not necessarily new."

Indeed, public health has always had a role to play at HTJ, which has a history of partnering with health organizations to provide resources and testing to attendees. This year the event is offering COVID-19 vaccines. Also not new is the fact that making HTJ happen requires hard work from many people behind the scenes.

KYRA SANDERS

Kyra Sanders is a proud Detroit and proud ally of the LGBTQ+ community. A community planner for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, she brings public health

expertise to her role on the HTJ planning committee.

In fact, it was her idea to provide COVID-19 testing as part of HTJ, the first Pride event to do so. Sanders used the connections she's made over her years working in public health to help make the COVID-19 testing a reality.

"I made the recommendation during one of the [planning] meetings," she tells BTL. She told the HTJ committee, "I can connect you with individuals who are able to provide those services."

The result is three in-person testing and vaccination zones where people can get tested for HIV and vaccinated against COVID-19. Testing and vaccinations will be available Friday, July 23 and Saturday July 25 from 12-5 p.m. at both Palmer Park and Backstreet at Large from 8-10 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

"I am a native Detroit and I'm a person who believes in science," she says. "I'm familiar with the way [COVID-19] ravaged my community at the height of the pandemic." She adds that people need access so that they have the opportunity to get vaccinated.

"I'm a person who believes in the possibility of people and prevention," Sanders says. "That's why I've found my home in public health."

For people unsure about getting the vaccine, Sanders says, "They need to look within themselves" and "talk to their medical provider or talk to someone who is trusted and aware of the science and just make the best decision for themselves."

She adds that the HTJ vaccination and

testing zones are "your opportunity to get [information] firsthand from a medical professional."

In addition to free COVID-19 vaccinations, there will also be free rapid HIV testing.

"It's a simple finger prick and the test itself is run on site," Sanders says, with results available within 20 minutes. Sanders stressed that people will be supported through the process, regardless of the results.

Each agency providing HIV testing can link people to care service and support services, says Sanders, "whether it's food assistance, identifying safe and secure housing, or speaking with another person living with HIV."

She encourages people curious about their HIV status, people who test regularly but have been interrupted due to COVID-19, people who have already tested positive but have fallen out of care, and people who have questions to "go check it out."

Sanders, who has been doing work surrounding HIV in some capacity for 21 years, understands the fear and stigma that still surrounds HIV testing.

"The stigma is literally killing Black and brown people," she says.

The Black LGBTQ+ community already faces a number of structural barriers, Sanders says. "And then you pile on the fact that you are a person, and you want to live happy and open in a world that is not always welcoming."

In addition to creating safe spaces for the community, Sanders says we also need to create brave spaces where "people are allowed to be

brave and supported."

She hopes people will take advantage of HTJ's health zones to get vaccinated and know their status.

"Having access to services eliminates a barrier," which increases a person's likelihood to engage those services, she says. "That's the purpose, in my opinion, of public health. We find a gap and we work and stand in the gap."

"I believe the community has the ability to save itself and to support itself," she says. "It's a pleasure and an honor to do this work."

LILLITH JACKSON

Lillith Jackson was born in Detroit but currently lives in Ann Arbor where they attend the University of Michigan. Jackson, who identifies as non-binary and bisexual, is a junior majoring in Japanese international studies with a possible German minor. "I learn languages for fun," they say. "I'm planning for study abroad after COVID dies down."

It was through U-M that they got connected with LGBT Detroit where they serve as an intern.

"I was assigned to LGBT Detroit after applying to the Detroit Community Engaged Research Program (DCERP)," Jackson says, explaining that there are organizations that work with U-M to connect with students as a way to become more engaged with the community.

LGBT Detroit is one of these organizations. "I actually didn't know it existed until I started

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Kyra Sanders is a community planner for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Photo: Andrew Potter

→ HTJ

Continued from page 6

volunteering because I was isolated from anything queer or LGBT until I went to college," Jackson says. "This is my first internship ever."

Jackson chose to work with LGBT Detroit "because I am also queer and I grew up in Detroit, but I did not know that we had a Black-founded queer organization, so I thought I would get to know this part of Detroit better that I was basically closed off to when I was younger."

Their role in HTJ is volunteer management for the testing and vaccination zones. "I'm the main point of contact for volunteers and our testing partners," they say.

HTJ is important, Jackson says, because it is "meant to engage Black queer community" which is "often neglected and marginalized." They add that HTJ "is a place for people to go who are typically not welcome in a lot of spaces."

Jackson adds that HTJ brings "the Black queer community together for this weekend event so that people have a place to have fun and live their best lives."

And, of course, part of living your best life is taking care of your health, which is why the testing and vaccination zones are such a crucial part of HTJ. "Testing is really important in the LGBT community," Jackson says.

Jackson is glad to be a part of HTJ. "It means LGBT community," they say. "It means that I am getting in touch with and having a very intimate connection to the Black queer community and it's a bridge for me to (be a) part of myself that I was disconnected from because my family never allowed me to go to Pride or Pride events."

Jackson's family was not accepting growing up. "My mom wasn't homophobic, but the rest of my family is extremely homophobic," they say. "They don't like gay people, queer people, doesn't matter."

This caused a rift between Jackson and their family. "Out of fear of my family judging me I

had to kind of self segregate."

Jackson, who is 20, and is only really out to their mom and dad, says, "I got away from my family so I wasn't contactually having to feel like I'm going to upset this person or this person. Once I became an adult I didn't have to really answer to anyone."

Jackson says being at U-M is a welcome change. "We have a great LGBT group known as the Spectrum Center and in most if not all spaces I have never had someone be outwardly homophobic," Jackson says. "Everyone is accepting, everyone is kind, everyone respects your pronouns, respects your gender. It's one of the most accepting communities I've been in in my whole life."

Celebrating Pride is important to Jackson. "It means freedom to be who I am without judgment, without fear, without the anxiety that I'm going to be rejected, hated, or hurt. Pride is freedom."

MYKELL PRICE

For the past three years, Mykell Price has been part of the planning committee for HTJ and has been involved with LGBT Detroit since 2009. His role in HTJ this year is as a volunteer coordinator, organizing and managing the many volunteers who make HTJ a reality each year.

Managing volunteers for a primarily virtual event is a change from past years, Price says, adding that the need for volunteers "has become more diverse" now that two of the biggest jobs, setting up and breaking down the event, are not a focus. But Price is confident that during the event they will have the people in place to "make sure the flow of the virtual event is happening" and that the testing and vaccination locations are up and running.

Originally from Detroit, Price currently lives in Ypsilanti. He began attending HTJ in 2002 "right after I graduated high school."

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2021 Ann Arbor Pride Unveils Lineup, Engaging LGBTQ+ Community in New Ways

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The organizers of Ann Arbor Pride (AAP) have released the entertainment lineup for this year's virtual celebration.

AAP, which started in 1995 as OUTFest, will take place virtually for the second year in a row on Aug. 7. Viewers will be able to watch all Pride events on AnnArborPride.com as well as on AAP's Facebook and YouTube pages. This year's format will allow viewers to easily find the acts they are most interested in seeing.

"The challenge of planning a virtual show is the production and making sure everybody has your content in on time," said local entertainer and AAP Entertainment Director Jadein Black. "Also, making sure the contact is entertaining enough as if it were in person. Dealing with different artists that will be calling in live from different parts of the country is hard, too. Last year's virtual Pride was broadcast from my own home where we have done over 150 virtual shows since [the pandemic began]."

So, in a sense, Black is a pro at this point and AAP and the Jim Toy Community Center (JTCC), the agency that produces it, are lucky to have her.

"We learned a lot from last year," said JTCC President Joe Schoch. "Last year, technology was our biggest learning curve. This year, we have been able to learn from the Boylesque team who had been running virtual events all year long. We also learned the importance of accessibility beyond COVID restrictions."

"A big challenge this year is virtual meeting fatigue," Schoch continued. "To solve this problem, we are working with different community groups, restaurants, and others to host smaller watch parties and events."

While some folks are a little tired of the virtual format, Schoch said the community has been supportive and

understanding of AAP's goals.

"With Michigan open, we need to stay creative in how we engage with the community," he said.

Headlining AAP this year will be VINCINT, perhaps best known for his time on the reality competition TV show "The Four." VINCINT, originally from Philadelphia, is a singer and songwriter and an undeniable upcoming talent. He released his debut album, "There Will Be Tears," in June. The album features special guests Alex Newell, Tegan and Sara, Parson James and Queen Herby.

Other notable acts include trans country singer Brody Ray, the Out Loud Chorus, Unveiled Dance Company, two drag revues starring Black and others, and a special talk from Lilianna Angel Reyes, a founding mother and executive director of the Trans Sistas of Color Project.

"The best part of Ann Arbor Pride is bringing together our diverse community," said Schoch. "Ann Arbor Pride is a connection point for people and will continue to spread light and love to all."

2021 Ann Arbor Pride Talent Lineup

10 a.m. Ann Arbor Pride Virtual Yoga with instructor Jessica Warnemuende

11 a.m. Redi Choi

12:30 a.m. Unveiled Dance Company

1 p.m. Brody Ray

2:15 p.m. Speaker Lilianna Angel Reyes

2:30 p.m. Local Drag Revue

4 p.m. Out Loud Chorus

5 p.m. Drew De Four & Kin Curran

6:30 p.m. Second Drag Revue

8 p.m. VINCINT



Viewpoint Anti-Trans Mythmaking

BY GWENDOLYN ANN SMITH

Myths are often greater than reality. Consider Napoleon Bonaparte, the leader of France during the early 1800s. You likely believe he was exceptionally short, and his stature has often been used as a pretext for his ferocity in battle. There's even a complex named after this.

But Napoleon was around 5' 7" by many accounts, certainly of at least average height for his time. It was the British press, most notably its cartoonists, who portrayed him as a short, angry despot — and their caricatures have created a common misconception that remains stronger than any reality.

In my life, I've seen quite a few such things, like the Apollo conspiracy theory, where people have felt that something as monumental as the moon landing was perpetrated on a soundstage. Similarly, people hold beliefs about the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attack and even the supposed flatness of the Earth are all deeply hidden government secrets that "they" don't want you to know.

Today, we see any number of stories spun up far worse than a cartoon depicting a short French leader. There are numerous conspiracy theories that have been all but weaponized, with the QAnon conspiracy ranking number one on the list. These followers literally believe baby-consuming Satanists are running a pedophilic sex trafficking ring.

Much like QAnon, there are hundreds of other such conspiracy theories, usually affecting members of

the right wing: the death of Seth Rich, both the 2016 and 2020 election, the birthplace of former President Barack Obama, Hunter Biden's laptop, the Deep State, COVID-19, masks and vaccinations are just the tip of that particular iceberg.

Most of these are created on the flimsiest of evidence, or even no evidence at all. These theories simply have to "feel right" to their believers. Just having something that somehow affirms their beliefs is enough.

Enter, once again, the transgender bathroom predator.

It has been years since anti-trans panic was spun up to defeat LGBTQ+ laws like the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) in 2015. The entire argument hinges on people believing that such bills would lead to a flood of male predators claiming to be trans women in order to have easy access to women and children in bathrooms.

The same argument was put forward in scores of additional fights, even this year as Tennessee enacted a law requiring businesses to display prominent signs in their windows should they allow trans people to use the facilities. Thankfully, the measure was recently blocked — otherwise, businesses would have had to display signs that read, "NOTICE: THIS FACILITY MAINTAINS A POLICY OF ALLOWING THE USE OF RESTROOMS BY EITHER BIOLOGICAL SEX, REGARDLESS OF THE DESIGNATION ON THE RESTROOM."



“Indeed, the only stories that have cropped up have been from men attempting to root out transgender women from women’s restrooms, usually only angering non-transgender women who they erroneously targeted.”

Yes, in all caps, boldface, and on a sign a minimum of 6” tall. In all these years, there has been scant evidence of anyone actually taking advantage of non-transgender women or girls in such facilities. Indeed, the only stories that have cropped up have been from men attempting to root out transgender women from women’s restrooms, usually only angering non-transgender women who they erroneously targeted.

Enter Wi Spa.

Wi Spa is a Korean-owned, LGBTQ-friendly spa in Los Angeles. Wi Spa has a few transgender clients, and those clients are welcome to use facilities congruent with their gender identity.

On the 24th of June, an Instagram user named “cubanaangel” posted a video where she complained to the Wi Spa staff about the presence of a trans woman — who she referred to as a man — attending the spa that day. She further claimed that both women and girls in the spa were offended by the presence of the trans women’s genitalia. The video cuts off just as the woman is about to confront the trans woman herself.

Yet a report in the Los Angeles Blade casts doubt on this user’s report, as an anonymous LAPD source has told the Blade that they have found no cooperating evidence that a transgender woman was at the spa that day. Wi Spa, too, noted that none of its usual transgender clients had appointments that day. All of their trans clients are well-known by the staff, and access to the spa is by appointment only.

Likewise, “cubanaangel’s” Instagram account mostly includes Christian memes, making one question why she would opt to go to a known LGBTQ-friendly spa. No one has corroborated her story. This is also not the first time the spa has been targeted for being trans friendly.

Nevertheless, a right-wing protest spun up on the 3rd of July, attracting religious fundamentalists, right-wing Proud Boys, and QAnon believers. Counter protestors also showed up, and some were attacked in the following standoff. A second protest is in the works as right-wing pundits like Tucker Carlson fan the flames. All this for a spa visit that likely never happened, involving a transgender person who was almost certainly not there.

In the end, will that matter?

For years, the right has been seeking tales that affirm the idea that transgender people in general are predators and “cubanaangel’s” mythmaking is sure to support the fallacy. It won’t matter that no transgender person was there. Transgender people have been there in the past, and even if no activities have ever taken place, that is close enough. It confirmed their biases, and will be used as their rallying cry.

Add that the spa is Korean owned, and I’m sure the anti-Asian crowd will be plenty happy about all this, too.

Myths are often greater than reality — but this myth needs to die a very quick death, before more of us do.

Gwen Smith hates fighting fabricated facts. You’ll find her at www.gwensmith.com

Creep Of The Week

You Know How Jack Hibbs Knows Homosexuality Doesn’t Exist? Elk Sex.

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

This may come as a surprise to many of you, but there is a lot of porn on the internet. More porn than right-wing evangelical sites trying to sell you buckets of survivalist food or weird supplements, even.

Yet, it sure seems like some folks haven’t gotten the word that people have sex for reasons other than making babies.

One such person is Jack Hibbs, pastor of Calvary Chapel church in California.

During a July 11 sermon, Hibbs decided to own the evolutionist libs by giving a very well-researched lecture on elks doing it in order to prove that homosexuality is pretend.

“When two people of the same sex get together, it’s out of sheer wanton lust and pleasure only for self,” Hibbs tells the congregation. “Nothing comes of it. No life can come from it. No family can come from it.”

Well alrighty, then. Having sex for pleasure is bad, very bad.

Wait, though, what if two people of the opposite sex get together (and I realize that “opposite sex” isn’t really a thing because of gender fluidity and all, but I’m trying to think like Hibbs here) and have sex simply because they’re horny and don’t want to make a baby, is that still “wanton lust” and “pleasure only for self”? Like, what if they even use condoms or the woman is on birth control? What if the man has a vasectomy? Does Hibbs know that kind of thing happens, like, all the time?

“If you’re an evolutionist, you have to be against same-sex union,” Hibbs continues. “In evolutionary theory, the survival of the fittest has to procreate.”

Hibbs then launches into a kind of Christian Animal Planet episode to back this up.

“That’s why you watch, they study all the animals, and there’s the big elk, the big bull elk,” he begins. And already we’re on shaky ground.

“And what does he have to do every spring? He has to take on the young elks. Beat ‘em up,” he says, punching a fist into his hand to illustrate how elks fight. “And the strong one, the strong one by natural selection, the strong one survives.”

Got it. Mr. Elk has kicked the ass of all the junior elks. And what does Mr. Elk do next?

“He impregnates all the other, uh, elkees,” Hibbs says, and the crowd starts laughing like they’re watching a stand-up comedy routine. “I don’t know. Does? Elkettes? I don’t know.” This is the pinnacle of evangelical humor right here.

I mean, one could point out that he’s trying to use elk mating as evidence to back up a pretty bold claim and that the fact that he doesn’t even know that female elks are called cows hurts his credibility on this subject. But why spoil the fun?

Which is why I began this whole thing talking about

“During a July 11 sermon, Hibbs decided to own the evolutionist libs by giving a very well-researched lecture on elks doing it in order to prove that homosexuality is pretend.”

porn on the internet. Because if Hibbs doesn’t even know how to Google something so simple, I suspect he might be missing a lot of what’s going on in the cyber world.

“And so he looks over his harem, and they’re all producing babies, and he’s like, YES!” Hibbs says, giving his stamp of approval on promiscuity. “And evolutionists say, ‘Right on! That’s it, see? It’s in action!’”

“Right on” sounds like something evolutionists watching elk while stoned might say, but OK.

“But if evolution is true, then there would be no such thing as homosexuality, because over the last 400 trillion, billion, zillion, quadrillion, zillion, nillion, years,” he says, the audience once again laughing at his hilarity, “evolution would have washed that out.”

I... don’t think that’s how evolution works? Because that would mean that all non-procreative sex would die out. Blow jobs would not be a thing, for example. All Hibbs had to do was Google “blow jobs,” and he could have spared himself this embarrassment.

“Homosexuality—LGBTQ actions—prove the existence of God,” Hibbs says.

Oh, OK. I think that’s supposed to be a compliment? He continues, “Because God’s word says this would be some of the outcome and actions of the Last Days.”

Ah, got it. Not a compliment. He’s saying the existence of LGBTQ+ people doing “actions” is an end times thing.

I’m not a professional evolutionist or anything, but queer sexuality and “actions” have always existed. Even in non-human species. So if such things still exist, maybe it’s not something that can be explained using an incredibly simplistic view of what is a very complicated and heavily researched kind of science? And by Hibbs’s logic, wouldn’t that mean we’ve been in the Last Days literally forever?

Ugh. This is the longest Last Days of my life.

Lendale Johnson Stands and Delivers

Kalamazoo Native on the Power of Coming Out as a Pro Athlete: 'Visibility Is Invaluable'

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

"Wimbledon puts me in a great mood."

This is the first thing Lendale Johnson tells *Between The Lines* after "hello" during a phone interview. He is watching the championship and rooting for Novak Djokovic.

"People just love to hate him because he's beaten everyone's favorite player," Johnson says.

Still, it's also fair to say that Johnson is cheering on the sport as a whole. "In the tournament, I really want to see everyone just do well," he says.

You could say that Johnson, who grew up in Kalamazoo but now lives in Brooklyn, is a multidimensional tennis fan. He loves the game not only as a spectator but also from a business perspective as the owner of The Johnson High Performance Tennis Academy in Brooklyn and as a professional player on the men's ITF circuit.

Johnson is also the first Black male tennis player to come out as gay.

"People need to come out, especially in sports," Johnson says, adding that the world of sports has the power to change the larger world and that coming out is a way of holding himself accountable. "Visibility is invaluable."

Not only are there not a lot of out male players in tennis, but tennis also has a reputation as a "white sport" with "a lot of homophobia," Johnson says.

"With me being a double minority, it's even more powerful," he says. "It's given me more inspiration and more motivation to play and do even better. If I hadn't come out, I wouldn't have all this support of people rooting for me and getting all these sponsors and investors."

That's not to say coming out has

always been a positive experience.

"I've created a target for positive and negative things," he says. Not only does he have to deal with "the homophobia that's very prevalent in the world," but also, "being a Black athlete in this sport, you're still going to get people who don't want me to be on the court," he says. "People aren't going to say that outright, but I'm sure it's there."

Thankfully, he has some high-profile well-wishers, including tennis legend and lesbian icon Billie Jean King.

On both Instagram and Twitter, King wrote, "So proud of you and all you've accomplished. Keep inspiring others, and keep going for it."

It means a lot to him. "I can't even explain. I almost cried," he says. "She really, really sees me, and she hears me, and she's supporting me."

King's encouragement is something Johnson will draw strength from "for the rest of my life," he says. "If I have a bad day in the office or I'm doubting myself, Billie Jean King is in my ear, and she always will be."

He also heard from Venus Williams. "Makes me feel very proud of myself," he says. "I just want to keep making everyone proud and keep going for it."

While Johnson is currently focused on his tennis career, he's a model and an actor set to star in Amazon Prime's upcoming reality show "Deuces and Love." The show will follow Johnson around Hollywood as he takes on issues like racism and problems in the world of professional tennis, his career and his love life.

Johnson has come a long way from his days as a kid growing up in a religious family in Kalamazoo, where he says that despite feeling sheltered, he experienced white supremacy, discrimination and homophobia.

"At that age, you don't really know what those things are," he says. "I felt at a young age that I wasn't being treated like everyone else."

He got through it, he says, by being "a strong-willed kid."

"I grew up in a predominately white school. There weren't any Black people in that school at all, let alone being gay as well," he says. "I got made fun of and bullied in middle school."

High school wasn't any easier. "Back in high school, I had really long hair, a really feminine voice," he says.

He acknowledges that his experience was, unfortunately, not unusual. "High school is really a jungle, and you have to deal with what's in your face."

He recalls one encounter at school that led to his suspension during his senior year at Portage Northern. During final exams in his math class, a white teacher kept misgendering Johnson, even after being corrected by other students.

"I finally just had it, and I ended up saying some profanity to her, and I had to leave the classroom and leave the building," he recalls. "When my parents found out, they weren't even upset about it because they understood what happened."

Many of his classmates, however, were surprised to witness the eruption. "It's funny because I'm so soft-spoken," he says.

Johnson had been misgendered before in school, and he recalls that some students stood up for him, including one who yelled at someone disrespecting him. "She got removed from class for trying to protect me," he says. "A really popular student supporting you really changes the dynamics of the entire classroom. Kudos to those popular students for

See **Lendale Johnson**, page 16



Photo: Laura Barisonzi



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Photo courtesy of Davon Fleming

Healing in the Spirit of Love

'The Voice' Semi-Finalist Davon Fleming Chats Before His Hotter Than July Gig

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Davon Fleming is a vocal force to be reckoned with.

Since becoming a semi-finalist on season 13 of "The Voice," Fleming has been touring as a backing vocalist with his "Voice" coach, Jennifer Hudson. He has also released a Christmas single and, earlier this year, the touching ballad "Reach Your Heart." Fleming is currently working on an EP in his limited free time.

Fleming will headline the Hotter Than July Virtual Picnic on Saturday, July 24. The event is a collaboration between LGBT Detroit, the nation's largest and longest-running Black-led LGBT organization, and the largest and longest-running LGBTQ+ publication in Michigan, Pride Source's Between The Lines.

The singer spoke to BTL while driving back home to Baltimore from a show date in Greenville, South Carolina.

Tell me about your beginnings. You were a church boy?

I loved being a church boy. I grew up in the church. I started singing at the age of 3. It's definitely where I got my foundation in singing. Watching my mom sing, it touched me in a way that was really remarkable. And when I first sang in church, I knew that's what I wanted to do. I was giving something to [the congregation] at that time. I didn't know what it was. But I was just enjoying people enjoying my singing.

Did you have issues coming out, given your religious upbringing?

I've never really had to come out. My story was not that dramatic. Growing up, my family always knew what it was. I didn't know what to call it, but I was comfortable in my own skin. I didn't have a horrible story of my family treating me as an outcast. Thank God we loved each other enough, and we were strong enough in our relationship and our values to keep our relationship going, and that was never an issue.

How would you describe your singing style?

My music is about healing and operating in the spirit of love, and if we Christians say that God is love, then we have to love everybody. It doesn't gear toward one crowd. I can perform in front of any crowd. I am someone who embraces everybody, and I think that's why people gravitate toward me 'cause before I open my mouth, I'm likable. The same thing that I'm doing at church, I can do down the street at the jazz festival and still get the same response.

Talk to me about your journey to "The Voice." What were you doing, say, between high school and being cast on the show?

I went on BET's "Sunday Best." I was a contestant on that show. I was always singing. I was always participating in music. For years, I

See **Davon**, page 22

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Photo: Laura Barisonzi

→ Lendale Johnson

Continued from page 12

having my back.”

He has since heard from some of those very same people who treated him badly. “Most of them just reach out and apologize and just praise me for my success,” he says.

Johnson came out right after high school. “My mom was doing my hair. She slapped me in the face when I told her I was gay, and I ran away from home.”

He recalls that she said, “You won’t claim that. You won’t claim gayism in my home. I wasn’t going to disrespect myself, so I left.”

Looking back, Johnson understands where she was coming from. “She clearly wasn’t happy with it,” he says. “And I feel like that was her way of being a Black mother to try to protect me: ‘You can’t be like that, the world is going to be harder for you if you’re like that.’ She didn’t say that out of her mouth, [though].”

Johnson describes his parents and family as “extremely religious. Black church religious.”

Growing up in this environment was hard for him. “My mom had tried to pray and asked the pastors for a prayer for me about my homosexuality,” he says.

“Obviously, that didn’t work. That’s never going to work,” he says. “Trying to pray away homosexuality is never going to work — that’s part of our DNA. You’re not going to pray that out.”

Things are much different now. Johnson’s ex-boyfriend did his mother’s hair for his cousin’s wedding that they all attended together.

“It took her time to adjust,” he says, but she is accepting now.

“She’s just so religious, you know,” he says. “She believes in the Bible, and she believes homosexuals will, I guess, go to hell. But she’s had a change of heart, and I think now, it’s more about how God, I guess, looks at your heart at the end of the day, and I think that helped her get over the whole gay son thing.”

Johnson hopes more closeted athletes will come out, noting that it is bad for the mental health of LGBTQ+ athletes to do otherwise.

“I don’t think it’s good for the players mentally, at all, to not be out,” he says. “Every person is their own person, and we don’t know everyone’s exact reasons why they’re in the closet.”

Coming out today is much different than, say, when Billie Jean King was at the beginning of her career.


“Things are just getting better and better,” he says. “The future is bright, but we’re still fighting.”

Coming out has only helped his career, Johnson believes. “I feel very honestly it gives me more power.”

“There’s a lot of power in my racket now, and I have to realize that and stand and deliver,” he says.

To “stand and deliver” in tennis means that “your back is against the wall, a very difficult shot is coming right at you, and you take the shot, and you become victorious,” he explains. “I am standing and delivering now.”


For more on Lendale Johnson, visit <https://www.lendalejohnson.com>.



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Finding the Resiliency in Their Grief

How Two Local Ballroom Godmothers Made Sure VICE Got the Whole Story About Murdered Trans Woman Kelly Stough

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

When VICE News sent a film crew to Detroit to shoot a documentary about the life and death of Kelly Stough, a Detroit transgender woman brutally murdered in 2018, it quickly became clear the crew didn't have the whole story.

That's when Lilianna Angel Reyes Ebony and Jey'nce Mizrahi Poindexter stepped in. The pair are "godmothers" in the Detroit Ballroom scene, a decades-old cultural movement that supports Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ community members in crucial ways. The two made it clear that "Love Us in the Light," the first episode of the new VICE News series "Transnational," would only be complete if it depicted the importance of that scene to her while also honoring Stough and her life.

Mizrahi Poindexter remembers Stough, who was a spiritual woman, as "funny and loving." And Reyes Ebony called her "amazing." Both Stough and Reyes Ebony were sisters in the renowned international Ballroom House of Ebony. Being an active part of the Ballroom scene was important to Stough, who was "very supportive of the girls," said Reyes Ebony.

"It was our idea that they film something more personable," she recalled. "VICE came with the notion that they were going to only talk about Kelly, and we decided that we wanted to show them a little bit of resiliency, so it was actually our idea."

Mizrahi Poindexter concurred.

"We didn't want to just wallow in trauma and hurt and pain," she explained. "What we wanted to do is show the strength, the inner communal strength, and the love that is transformative and that really has kept us [going] through all the trauma and hurt."



Lilianna Angel Reyes Ebony (second from left) and Jey'nce Mizrahi Poindexter (far right) in a group portrait. Photo courtesy of VICE

As for the title "Love Us in the Light," it refers to straight men who try to hide — or keep in the dark — their relationships with trans women of color. Stough, herself, was allegedly killed by an intimate partner — a pastor she encountered through sex work. The suspect is currently out on bond awaiting trial.

"Many, many, many of the trans women of color who are murdered are murdered by people who have been close to them and/or have been lovers to them," Reyes Ebony said. She added that Black and brown men are often ashamed to be open about their love for trans women of color "because society will label them gay, or other or whatever."

In the episode, Reyes Ebony says she has "stopped keeping count" of how many loved ones she has lost to violence.

Reyes Ebony said loss is something she'll

never get used to — and shouldn't have to. Still, as a community leader, she's often the first to hear about a murder or act of violence and the first to recount these incidents with loved ones.

"I think that most of the [Between The Lines] readers will never know what that [loss is] like," Reyes Ebony said. "It's not something we aim to know."

Reyes Ebony is acutely aware of differences she sees between her community and white-led LGBTQ+ organizations — white trans organizations in particular. "While other people are gathering for fun and for arts and crafts," she said, "we are gathering to try to stop Black and brown trans women from dying. They don't really do work across 8 Mile."

Reyes Ebony said white trans women often come out later in life than trans women of color — she surmises that "visibility" is often

an integral part of that process. However, she said, being "visible" for Black and brown trans women can mean risking death.

Certainly, both Reyes Ebony and Mizrahi Poindexter are visible leaders of the LGBTQ+ community.

Reyes Ebony directs the drop-in program at the Ruth Ellis Center (REC) and serves as executive director of the local Trans Sistas of Color Project (TSOCP), an organization whose mission is to uplift, influence and impact the lives and well-being of trans women of color. While they provide various support services, most donations received by the group go toward emergency assistance and funds for funeral arrangements when there's a community need. TSOCP receives no grant money and relies on donations.

Mizrahi Poindexter is a case manager at REC and communications director for TSOCP. They are also mothers in their respective Ballroom "houses."

Like biological motherhood, it's a 24-hour job, Mizrahi Poindexter pointed out. A mother doesn't get to choose her children based on their personalities and characteristics. If a call comes in that someone has been hurt or shot, a mother simply takes action.

"Because I transitioned young, I may not ever have the ability to have children," Reyes Ebony said, though she doesn't desire biological children. "My kids are everything. They're my chance at being a mother. I house them. I feed them. I take them places. I am their mother when their biological parents cannot be there because of their LGBT-ness."

"I would die for my children," she said.

See **Ballroom Godmothers**, page 25



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Here's What Happening at Hotter Than July

Hotter Than July has been celebrating Black LGBTQ+ people in Detroit since 1996. While COVID-19 necessitated LGBT Detroit to shift to a primarily virtual event, you can still expect a spectacular showcase of community and culture on July 23-25.

FRIDAY, JULY 23

11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Candlelight Vigil

A socially distanced memorial for people lost within the year, especially those impacted by COVID-19, held at Palmer Park.

11:30 a.m. Endorsement Committee Forum

An opportunity to hear from candidates endorsed by The LGBT Detroit Mobilization Candidate Endorsement Committee.

8 p.m. Hotter Than July Art Show

A live showcase of a variety of artists including awards and recognition for significant contributions including Chris Sutton, Rhiannon Chester-Bey, Rod Risbrook, Backpack Durden, Brandon Merriman-Boddy and Susan Bankston.

SATURDAY, JULY 24

12 p.m. Digital Picnic and Showcase

A competition of performers including poets, dancers, drag artists and musicians competing live on stage in front of a panel of judges to win a \$500 prize.

SUNDAY, JULY 25

11 a.m. One Church Detroit Worship Service

Join One Church Detroit for their Sunday worship service with Pastor Jeffery Seals.

1 p.m. Brunch by Imagine This Productions

Meet community advocates in Detroit who have made a tremendous impact throughout the year.

8 p.m. Livestream Ball

Performers will compete in a variety of categories, including Sex Siren ("Bring it in your hottest swimwear") and Runway ("Bring a devil/hell inspired look") for \$1,800 in prizes.

For more information visit <https://www.lgbtdetroit.org/hotterthanjuly>.



Lillith Jackson's role in HTJ is in volunteer management for the testing and vaccination zones. Photo: Andrew Potter

→ HTJ

Continued from page 8

"A lot of members of my family and also people in my social network were actually attending this huge event and I didn't understand what it was until I went," he tells BTL. "They kept talking about this annual event in the summer time at Palmer Park."

His reaction to his first HTJ: "Wow, this is great."

And so Price became a regular attendee, starting as a vendor selling his artwork and handcrafted jewelry.

"I grew up in the LGBT community in Detroit, so I know a lot of folks in this community and I identify as a member of the LGBT community as well," he says.

As he grew up he started to "really understand my own social identity," he says. "Once I started to identify as LGBTQ myself, all of the events I've primarily attended have been in LGBT affirming spaces."

Price's family has always been inclusive and welcoming. "One member of my family came out as a trans woman when I was 6 years old and that was my first introduction to any LGBTQ identities," Price says. "My family really embraced and supported her female identity and I think it was really helpful for me to see so much affirmation poured into her."

Unfortunately, additional exposure was limited. "From there, the only other awareness and knowledge I had around LGBT identities was watching television," Price says.

Price watched shows like "Jerry Springer" and others that included LGBTQ+ identities, "but through a negative lens," he says. "Those shows stigmatized LGBT identities."

Still, he found them intriguing because he saw some of his own experiences. "But the violence and the bullying and the stigmatizing statements that were made about the LGBT community kept me afraid to identify my own identity," he says.

Thankfully, as Price transitioned into adulthood he wasn't limited to learning about LGBTQ+ people and culture from daytime TV and soon realized "how prevalent LGBTQ identities are."

His mother, for example, had "a lot of lesbian friends," he says. "I saw my mother, who is really

close to me, embracing and supporting the lesbian community and I thought it was awesome to see that my mother was a strong ally. So once I started to disclose things about my own identity to my family, I was very much so accepted and supported and was encouraged to pursue my own happiness and my true identity. All of my friends, all of my family members have been very accepting."

Which is how he finds himself a staple at HTJ.

"It's important to have a Black Pride event because Black culture is very unique," Price says.

"I don't know if the white LGBTQ community realizes how they show up or don't show up for the Black LGBTQ folks." At many Pride events, he says, "Things seem to be very centered around white culture," with people who express a desire for "more diverse options" being "met with resistance or just not being responded to."

He says, "We just have to either assimilate to the things that are given to us and appreciate those things or to just create our own spaces."

There is something special about those

spaces.

"At the intersection of blackness and queerness is an opportunity for folks to really experience those unique experiences together," he says. "To be around people who can relate to you as a Black and a queer person is very important to help support people's health and wellness."

After all, not every place is welcoming, with many being anti-Black or anti-LGBTQ+ or anti-both, he says. HTJ celebrates all that a person is, which is necessary "if we want to see people thrive and want them to feel like they really are part of a broader community."

In this way, HTJ is a refuge. "To bridge all of these pieces together there need to be spaces where people can recover from the anti-blackness and the anti-LGBTQ stigmatization," he says. "That is a very difficult life to live."

Price values being "in a space where I don't have to worry about my hair making people uncomfortable," or his skin or his hip hop culture.

"If it wasn't for Hotter Than July, I personally don't believe I would be living my truth," he says. "I have not experienced any other event like Detroit's Hotter Than July because being a native Detroiter I have my own ways of connecting to Detroit culture and my ways to connect to Black culture and LGBTQ culture, and so to be in one space that honors multiple parts of my own identities, I don't think it could be matched."



Mykell Price has been part of the planning committee for HTJ and has been involved with LGBT Detroit since 2009. Photo: Andrew Potter

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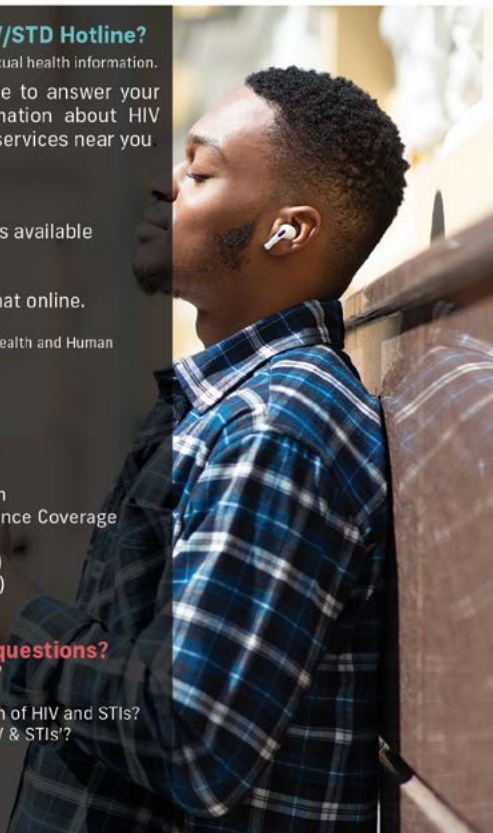
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Finding a testing site
Routes of HIV & STI transmission
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How can I prevent the transmission of HIV and STIs?
What are treatment options for HIV & STIs?
What is PrEP?
What is PEP?

CALL TODAY



→ Davon

Continued from page 14

always thought I was going to be a gospel singer up until I did "The Voice." I always wanted to do all kinds of music, but I had literally just come back from a tour of Italy, and they just happened to be doing auditions in Baltimore, where I'm from. So I was just like, "I'm going to go. With no expectations." By that time, I had already sung with the who's who of gospel music.

On the show, you picked Team Jennifer...

We're similar in so many ways. Of course, we are both powerhouse singers. But I wanted that kind of experience from someone who has lived it and been through it. Jennifer (Hudson) has done a TV show and been told no. I've faced a lot of adversity.

I've been told no. And for someone who has gone through the same thing and been told no and still made it, I can trust your word and I know, vocally, you're going to keep me here up until you can't because you're a person who appreciates true voices.

Tell me a bit about your experience on the show.

I charted number one every week. I am the only contestant from the show to have charted three different categories in one season: Christian, pop and soul. I ended as a semi-finalist. I got the chance to perform with a lot of people after that: Jesse J, Kim Burrell, we did a performance with John Legend, Chrisette Michele, Kirk Franklin, Mary Mary, the cast of "Pitch Perfect"... and I really benefited. I've gone to London, Germany, Switzerland. God, he's been good. I've done a Target commercial, a Toyota commercial, the Stellar Awards and Access Hollywood.

And you continue to work with Jennifer to this day?

It's been amazing because the same person we see on TV is the same person she is in real

life. She's genuine. She's humble. She's not big enough to not tell me how great I am. And she really didn't have to use me after the show, but she continued that relationship. And for that, I'll always be grateful.

You sang a lot of big ballads on the show, songs by Whitney Houston, Jennifer Holliday and

Christina Aguilera. You also received a lot of fan feedback encouraging you to sing "male songs," but when you finally sang John Mayer's "Gravity" in the semi-finals, you were eliminated. What do you think of that decision now? Do you regret not sticking to the divas?

I'm happy that I chose John Mayer's "Gravity." I did it my way. I kind of knew at that point that my time was pretty much up. I wanted to be diverse. That was my point of doing the show. I didn't want to be

put in a box or a category. I wanted to be myself. So, I wanted to do a male song. I chose my attire, my background, and I arranged those vocals, and it was an iconic performance for me. That performance was next to "I Am Changing."

You never want to be predictable. My goal was to just sing my ass off every week and make the charts because I wanted my resume to be great when I finished the show. And I left as a chart-topping artist.

You just turned 30. What does that mean to you?

Transitions, new beginnings. I'm a twin so it's double that. I'm in a new relationship. I'm moving soon. I'm going back out on tour. I'm going back to Germany in December. I'm just looking forward to starting this new life. I'm excited to see what it's going to offer me. There's money in the bank and there's love in my life, so I'm good.

Find out more about Davon Fleming @DavonFlemingOfficial.

"...I wanted my resume to be great when I finished the show. And I left as a chart-topping artist."

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Olivia Scott Welch and Kiana Madeira play terrorized girlfriends in Netflix's "Fear Street" film anthology. Photo: Netflix

HOW "FEAR STREET" BECAME QUEER STREET

The Director, Openly Gay Writer and Non-Binary Star on the Popular Book Series' Queer Evolution

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Phil Graziadei, the openly gay screenwriter behind Netflix's new queer-inclusive film trilogy based on spook master R.L. Stine's classic "Fear Street" series, remembers those teen horror-fiction books well. And he definitely remembers them not being very gay.

Published first in 1989 with "The New Girl," the "Fear Street" series focused on whodunit and paranormal events in the town of Shadyside, Ohio. The books weren't short on sinister camp, but they definitely lacked any kind of blatantly queer representation.

That hasn't stopped fans, as Graziadei notes, from cataloging "all the homoerotic undertones of each book" for years. In the '90s, when Stine published bestselling "Fear Street" titles like "Truth or Dare" and "The Boy Next Door," the LGBTQ+ community was more willing to accept queer crumbs.

But now it's 2021. On "Fear Street," bodies might be buried, but queerness shouldn't be.

"One of the first conversations that I had with the producers about it was, 'Why do we do this now?'" director Leigh Janiak says.

The answer came to them quickly: Shadyside, they decided, would be a town of outsiders, with a queer love story at the center. That queer couple would not only be the stars of the show — they'd be the heroes. They'd even have a better shot at surviving the terrifying events

that unfold throughout each of the trilogy's parts, which take place in 1994, 1978 and 1666.

"It was very clear to us very early on that we wanted to write this about queer leads," says Graziadei. "Obviously, queer representation in horror movies has a long and complicated history, for the most part. We're only seeing ourselves on screen as monsters or as victims. You know, maybe I don't always want to be the monster. I don't think that there's a reason why the queer people always have to see themselves that way."

The anthology kicks off with "Fear Street Part 1: 1994," where we meet Deena Johnson (Kiana Madeira) and Sam Fraser (Olivia Scott Welch) as they're experiencing a rift in their relationship. Sam is closeted and just moved to Sunnyvale with her mom — the town adjacent to Shadyside, where Deena lives, but nothing at all like the infamous setting for "Fear Street." Sunnyvale is rich and white. No one gets murdered there. When pure evil is unleashed in Shadyside in the form of a witch who's haunted the town for eons, Deena, Sam and their cadre of friends go on a deathly voyage through time to solve a nightmare that has haunted the town for 300 years.

Welch says the queer love story is "very indicative of modern-day cinema and how it's evolving, and how art is reflecting the elements of society that are becoming very inclusive and encouraging people to be themselves." It

was the "not so boxed in" quality of her and Madeira's romantically involved characters that particularly appealed to her about "Fear Street," because, as she and Janiak note, the horror genre still has work to do when it comes to queer representation.

"I hope this is just the beginning of a brand new era in terms of seeing minorities represented in these kinds of roles," Madeira says.

Janiak and Graziadei, the director-writer team behind 2014's indie creeper "Honeymoon," were intentional about having "Fear Street" move the needle forward for LGBTQ+ representation in horror films. Within the heteronormative confines of the horror genre, seeing actual queer people who aren't victims or villains has been a slow go, and Janiak says that even some of the most enduring horror films haven't always best represented the LGBTQ+ community.

Janiak, who has directed two episodes of the "Scream" TV series, points to Wes Craven's iconic "Scream" film, noting that, while an "amazing" horror movie, only white cisgender straight people led the cast. While Graziadei acknowledges some queer coding in "Scream," Janiak said she thinks that queerness in contemporary horror should go beyond subtext. "Coding is different than being (fully) recognized," she says.

That "Fear Street" goes beyond just gay vibes



was one of the most exciting parts of starring in the summer camp-set "Part Two: 1978" for non-binary actor Ryan Simpkins, who uses they/them pronouns. Even though the script didn't identify Simpkins' Alice character as gay, they believed from the onset that she was.

See **Fear Street**, next page



VICE correspondent Eva Reign interviews Jay'nce Mizrahi Poindexter. Photo courtesy of VICE

No one has more power or influence.

"It definitely is an accomplishment because not too many people can rise to that level," Mizrahi Poindexter said. Like Reyes Ebony, she also has achieved a great deal in her professional career. "For that to also be mirrored in Ballroom, it's something

that I'm really, really proud of," she said.

When it came to "Love Us in the Light," Reyes Ebony aimed to showcase the resiliency of the Detroit Ballroom scene. She wanted to show the support local community members offered one another in the wake of Stough's death. Mizrahi Poindexter explained that she learned resiliency — the kind that sustains her in her advocacy work today — through her position in the Ballroom community.

"I had to arrive and provide for my children in the Ballroom scene," Mizrahi Poindexter said. "I had to help my children prepare," she said, whether that meant practicing how to walk or assisting with makeup. She's also adept at helping community members struggling with mental health issues or those living with HIV. "So many of those skills transferred over into the way that I approach advocacy because I know what it means to be there for a person," she said.

"I know all of that because I learned it in the Ballroom realm," she added.

Reyes Ebony said Ballroom is a special place where people with similar struggles who, like Stough did, come together and "shine," even if the rest of the world doesn't let them.

"Up until now, Black and brown LGBT talents did not matter," Reyes Ebony said. "We were in the background. We did people's hair; we did people's makeup." She said that's changing now only because of Ballroom's place in popular culture. And that Detroit's Ballroom scene is unlike any other: "A place for us, by us."

Cindy are gay."

Alice's queerness aside, Simpkins says of Deena and Sam's enduring queer love, "It's so exciting to see a love story between two teenage girls being the main force behind a trilogy of studio movies. Like, that's crazy, and it isn't subtle. It's very explicit. There's an almost-sex scene!"

"It's so rare to get these characters whose sexuality is not demonized and isn't why they're being punished," Simpkins adds. "It's their love for each other that makes them succeed."

A love that even R.L. Stine was seemingly rooting for. Throughout the trilogy's development, Janiak had conversations with the author, who she said was "very supportive." Graziadei also felt that support: "He's very clearly been like, "'Fear Street' is for everybody."

→ Ballroom Godmothers

Continued from page 18

It's a sentiment Mizrahi Poindexter wholeheartedly agrees with. "My biological mother passed away," Reyes Ebony continued. "All I have is Jay'nce," she said, referring to Mizrahi Poindexter, her chosen mother.

In VICE's "Love Us in the Light," Reyes Ebony talks about her role as Godmother of the House of Ebony, which she's been a part of for over a decade. The House's focus on Black beauty speaks most to Reyes Ebony.

"I am a Mexican woman," Reyes Ebony said. "But I believe that all liberation is connected to Black liberation, so I want to start there. And so any place that uplifts Black beauty and Black liberation is important to me."

Always a leader in her House, Reyes Ebony spoke with a father of the House of Ebony — who's also her son — about her future role there.

"And so I was honored by him and by the leaders overall to be deemed as the Godmother," Reyes Ebony said. "And that is one of my biggest accomplishments in my career — and I say career, period. Because that is something that's really beautiful to me: I am a godmother of an international, iconic house that focuses, and has focused, on Black beauty and Black liberation."

Reyes Ebony also shared that Mizrahi Poindexter was recently deemed Queen Mother of the House of Mizrahi, which means she's mother to all Houses of Mizrahi, in all regions.

→ Fear Street

Continued from previous page

"She's so heavily queer coded," Simpkins says, "and working through this character, I just kept coming back to that. And honestly trying to fight that impulse to be like, 'I think Alice has maybe been in love with her best friend Cindy.' I kept trying to push that feeling away until I finally embraced it."

While playing the role, the actor said they didn't want Janiak or Emily Rudd, who plays Cindy, to invalidate their queer read on Alice. But after shooting, they did ask them how Alice identifies and whether Alice did indeed have a thing for Cindy. They were not wrong: "(Leigh and Emily) were like, '100 percent, Alice and

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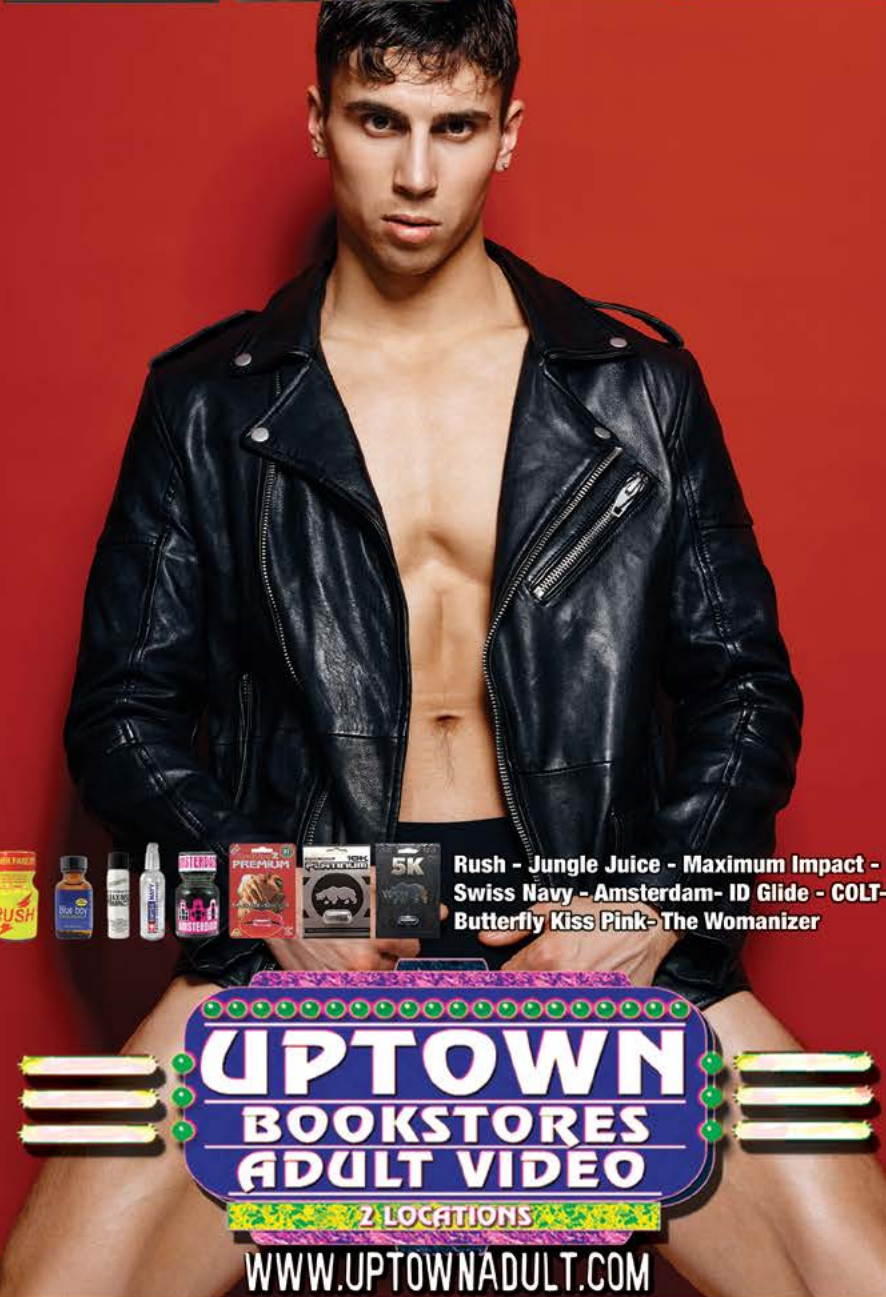
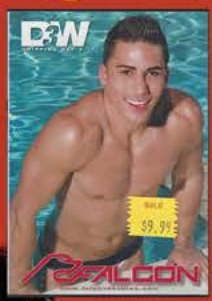
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The Ringwald's First Season at Affirmations Just Might Be Their Queerest Yet

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

The Ringwald Theatre has announced its much-anticipated 2021-2022 season, the first in their new performance space at Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center.

While the physical location of the theater has changed, The Ringwald still has the "same soul," according to Brandy Joe Plambeck, the theater's co-founder and media director.

"I am soooooo excited about our new home at Affirmations!" Plambeck writes via email. "We are thrilled to stay in Ferndale just a hop, skip, and a jump from our previous location. We are excited to continue to tell amazing stories and build a new partnership with the awesome folk at Affirmations."

According to The Ringwald's artistic director, Joe Bailey, audiences "can expect the same sense of fun and quality, as well as an expansion of our programs and a deeper community connection."

Serving as a board member, as well as a director, actor, video editor and writer, Dyan Bailey calls The Ringwald "accessible and empathetic."

"A place like the Ringwald is giving voice to so many stories that people don't normally have a lot of access to," she writes in an email to *Between The Lines*.

The new location has logistical advantages as well. "Better parking options, better lobby options, better bathroom options!" writes Bailey. She says that she's kidding, but those familiar with the previous location will no doubt appreciate these factors as there was no lobby to speak of — one had to go backstage to access the restroom.

She is looking forward to "A Very Golden Girls Christmas, Vol. 2," which she co-wrote and will direct. "In this 'Vol. 2' we edited the 2019 Woodward Avenue hit show, making it shorter and snappier!"

She offers this piece of advice: "Once tickets go on sale for 'Golden Girls,' it's best to buy them quickly. Our run in 2019 was sold out."

Plambeck is directing this season's "Ruthless! The Musical," about a young actress determined to play Pippi Longstocking at any cost. "Spoofing everything from 'The Bad Seed' to 'Gypsy' to 'All About Eve' to 'Mame,' 'Ruthless!' is camp with a capital C," according to The Ringwald's season announcement.

Plambeck is ready to get back to live theater. "It's so thrilling and unpredictable!" he writes. "We have all been sitting in front of our TVs and computers for so long, and it is time to connect with an audience and actors in a live space again."

The Lambda Award-winning "Bootycandy," which will be directed by Dan Johnson, "weaves together scenes, sermons, sketches, and daring meta-theatrics to create a kaleidoscopic portrayal of growing up gay and Black."

Johnson tells *Between The Lines* via email



Richard Payton as Blanche (left) and Brandy Joe Plambeck as Rose in The Ringwald's 2019 production of "The Golden Girls." Photo: Joe Plambeck

The Ringwald 2021/2022 Season At a Glance:

"Puffs," Oct. 15-Nov. 1, 2021

"A Very Golden Girls Christmas, vol. 2 (An Unauthorized Parody)," Nov. 19-Dec. 20, 2021

"Small Mouth Sounds," Feb. 18-March 15, 2022

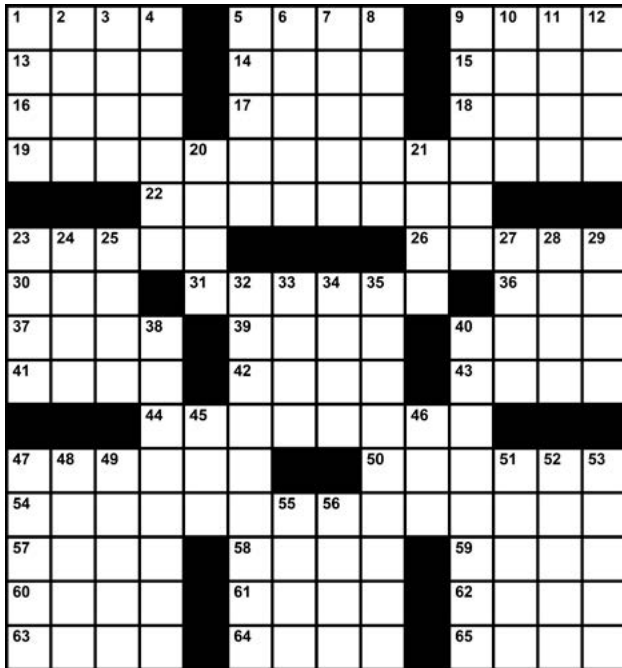
"Bootycandy," May 6-May 30, 2022

"Ruthless! The Musical," July 8-Aug. 15, 2022

that he has spent the last year "trying to champion anti-racism and greater inclusivity in the Michigan theater community."

Johnson writes that supporting live theater is important, but only live theater that is inclusive and welcoming to all communities. He says that people shouldn't support live theater "the way that it was: a space that marginalized and neglected so many communities — the BIPOC community, the LGBTQIA+ community, the disability community — and, in many cases, flat-out abused and traumatized so many individuals within those communities. The live theater of the past — actively white supremacist, actively ableist, actively homophobic and transphobic, actively misogynistic — should die screaming."

That said, Johnson is part of the "live theater of the future," specifically a Michigan theater of the future. "One that actively seeks to do the work to undo the damage that has been done to so many, on so many levels, and in its place builds spaces that are kinder, safer, more inclusive, more representational, more creative, and just plain more awesome," he writes.



- 36 "Once Upon a Mattress" bit
 37 More of the epitaph
 39 With 40-Across, series of the helmsman
 40 See 39-Across
 41 Pound sound
 42 "___ Get a Witness" (Marvin Gaye)
 43 Brontë's Jane
 44 Learn about
 47 Duel weapon in "Hamlet"
 50 Sudden coup
 54 End of the epitaph
 57 Close at hand, to the Bard
 58 Special delivery?
 59 Boston cager, for short
 60 Ending for auto
 61 Caesar's final reproach
 62 Future queen of "Star Wars"
 63 ___ Christian Andersen
 64 Penetrate slowly
 65 Vermont, to Vivien
- 11 Top priority of a top
 12 Light brown
 20 Hang out
 21 "Leave ___ Beaver"
 23 Not hard to get in bed
 24 Broadway bio homophone
 25 San Francisco's Nob ___
 27 "Aida," to Gomer?
 28 Look at a hottie in a bar
 29 "Swan ___"
 32 Frilly greens
 33 Not much
 34 Half of Mork's good-bye
 35 Foiled
 38 They were erect for Kopay
 40 Octopus arm
 45 Shoe store spec
 46 Not closet-bound
 47 Dressing type
 48 "The Seven Samurai" director Kurosawa
 49 One who kneels before Apollo
 51 Shooting type
 52 "As You Like It" woman
 53 Try to bash
 55 Kind of learning
 56 Peter's place

The Helmsman's Epitaph

Across

- 1 B.D. ___ of "M. Butterfly"
 5 Nemesis of Tinkerbell
 9 "The Way We ___"
 13 Composer Stravinsky
 14 Type of sci, in college
 15 Trump portrayer Baldwin
 16 Gin flavor
- 17 Pg. in a photocopier
 18 One with a tricky tongue
 19 Start of what the helmsman said his epitaph would be
 22 Toni of "United States of Tara"
 23 Merman of Broadway fame
 26 Online provoker
 30 Jackie O.'s second husband
 31 Rough house

Down

- 1 Genie's offering
 2 Gaze at gays, e.g.
 3 Former queen of Jordan
 4 Land of Socrates
 5 Screw up
 6 Sautéed delicacy
 7 Beethoven's "F,r ___"
 8 Cukor's "Dinner at ___"
 9 Karen of "Will & Grace"
 10 "Baby Doll" director Kazan

See p. 15 for answers

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