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# Between the Lines<sup>TM</sup>

## INSIDE:

A closer look at two unsung queer Detroit artists, **'Funny Girl' at the Fisher**, an LGBTQ+ activist's Ringwald debut, **a chart-topping Christian drag queen** and how the new 'Madame Butterfly' reframes a classic opera

# PRIDE IN THE PALETTE

THE FALL ARTS PREVIEW



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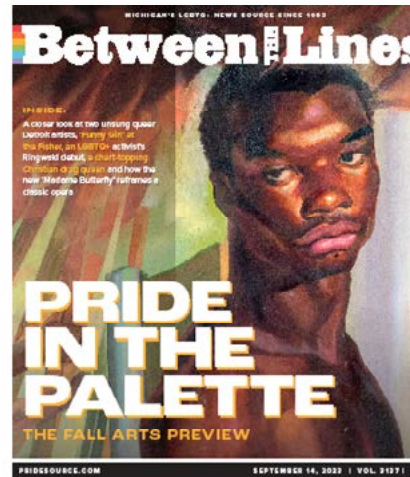
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LeRoy Foster, "Renaissance City" (detail), 1978, oil on canvas. Art courtesy of Collection Cass Technical High School



## PrideSource.com Has a New Look

You may have noticed that BTL's home on the web, PrideSource.com, has had some work done. Let's call it a digital eyebrow lift — you'll find the same commitment to queer-led content with a fresh new face. Let us know what you think on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram!

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

You totally deserve a break from the absolute shit-shows competing for your attention in the worlds of entertainment news and politics. We all do, which is why it's a good thing there are so many good things happening in the latter half of September. See a new queer movie or the premiere of a live, queer-forward theater performance, grab a new book by an LGBTQ+ author or head out for one of the last outdoor festivals of the season, the Funky Ferndale Art Fair. It's also Suicide Awareness Month, an opportune time to reflect on what we can do to drive down the numbers.



Ayo Edebiri stars as Josie and Rachel Sennott as PJ in "Bottoms." Photo: Patti Perret

## Catch a Queer Movie

You've seen the same raunchy, coming-of-age plot that unfolds in MGM's "Bottoms" countless times, but it hits differently when two adorable high school lesbians share the lead. Rachel Sennott and Ayo Edebiri play queer besties who start a girls-only fight club while plotting to lose their virginities to their cheerleader crushes. Silliness ensues in this critically acclaimed film, now in theaters, but it also offers a rare opportunity to see queer people portrayed on the big screen in a big way.

If you'd rather get your fill of queer rambunctiousness in your pajamas, Hulu's got you covered with "Theater Camp," a sweet send-up of summer drama camps. This 90-minute escape from reality stars Ben Platt, the out star of "Dear Evan Hansen," and Molly Gordon, who played Annabelle in the queer-led "Booksmart."

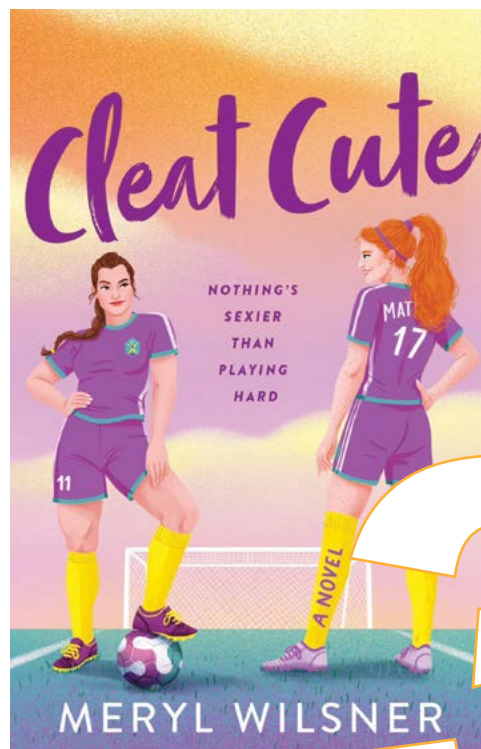


Rehearsal at Planet Ant Theatre. Photo: Planet Ant

## Get Tickets for 'Strange Attachments' at Planet Ant

Planet Ant's latest stage debut, "Strange Attachments," set for Sept. 29, explores a queer love story focused on "otherworldly connection, acceptance and the transformative power of understanding," according to press materials. Featuring a diverse cast of queer characters played by several queer actors, the performances also offer audiences a way to give back to the community through a raffle supporting Stand with Trans.

Sept. 29-30 and Oct. 6-7, 9 p.m. Planet Ant's Ant Hall (2320 Caniff St., Hamtramck). Tickets are available now at [planetant.com](https://planetant.com).

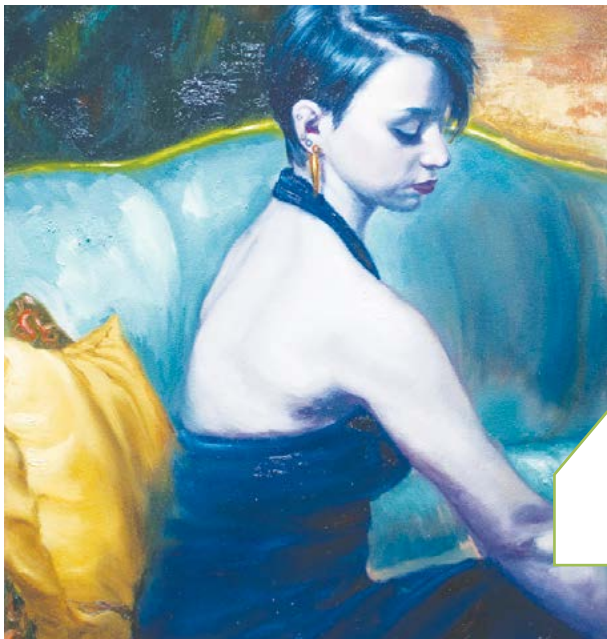


## Curl Up with a New Queer Book

Meryl Wilsner, a queer Michigan author who writes "happily ever after" fiction with a queer audience in mind — specifically queer readers who love women — is set to release her latest novel Sept. 19. The soccer romance "Cheat Cute" will appeal to fans of "Ted Lasso" and "A League of Their Own" and anyone who loves a good "rival-to-lover" romantic comedy. It's the perfect cozy, early fall read with lots of important representation, including neurodivergence, lesbian main characters and bi, nonbinary and trans supporting characters.

For a non-fiction new queer read, check out Melissa Etheridge's memoir, "Talking to My Angels," out now. In the two decades since penning her 2002 book, "The Truth Is...", Etheridge became a mother again, recorded 11 albums, won an Oscar, fell in love, overcame breast cancer and faced the death of her son Beckett, who died from an opioid overdose in 2020, all of which she explores in devastating depth in the new book.





Artwork by Amanda Irene. Photo: Amandalrene.com

### Attend the Funky Ferndale Art Fair

Head over to downtown Ferndale Sept. 22-24 for the Funky Ferndale Art Fair, an event focused on the wonderfully weird world of art in a vibrant street fair setting filled with music, food and a wide array of art available for purchase. The event features multiple LGBTQ+ artists, including Amanda Irene of Auburn Hills, whose work features oil paintings and provocative ink drawings, which she sometimes transforms into permanent ink through the art of tattoo design.

Sept. 22-24, downtown Ferndale. Details at [funkyferndaleartfair.com](http://funkyferndaleartfair.com).



### Recognize Suicide Awareness Month

September marks Suicide Awareness Month, a time to reflect on the devastating impact of a topic many of us shy away from discussing. In fact, experts assert, being more open about suicide could go a long way toward improving the stats. The LGBTQ+ community is especially vulnerable. Mental health experts have long warned that this demographic is more prone to suicide than cisgender, heterosexual folks, especially younger generations. The Trevor Project reports nearly half of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in 2022, a figure even more pronounced among trans youth and LGBTQ+ youth of color.

The National Institute of Mental Health recommends five steps for helping someone experiencing emotional pain or suicidal thoughts: 1. Ask your loved one about whether they've thought about suicide. 2. Keep them safe by reducing access to highly lethal items. 3. Be there — acknowledge what they are going through. 4. Help them connect to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline number and the Crisis Text Line (741741). 5. Stay connected after the crisis has passed.

Please check [lgbtdetroit.org](http://lgbtdetroit.org) for the most up-to-date scheduling information.



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# Returning to the Fisher Theatre, But This Time on Stage

Bloomfield Hills native Annaliese Wilbur on their full circle journey

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When actor, singer and dancer Annaliese Wilbur takes the Fisher Theatre stage on Sept. 26 as part of the Broadway touring cast of “Funny Girl,” which runs through Oct. 8, it will be a full circle moment for the Bloomfield Hills native.

Wilbur, who uses they/them pronouns, saw their first Broadway show, a production of “The Lion King,” around age 5 at the theater. “I stood up the whole show, gripping the chair in front of me, and I was breathing down the neck of the guy sitting in front of me while in my state of absolute awe,” Wilbur recalls. “Thankfully, he thought it was hilarious and let me keep my face in the nook between chairs so I could get the ultimate view of ‘The Lion King.’ My heart goes out to that guy still to this day — I wish I could thank him.”

The experience ignited a spark of curiosity, but when Wilbur graduated from Bloomfield Hills High School, they planned to become an engineer — the career path fit their interests and abilities and made a lot of sense coming from an automotive family in Metro Detroit. As college unfolded in Syracuse, New York, Wilbur would come to realize they were more interested in neuroscience and decided to add a minor in musical theater. Soon enough, it was clear there was nowhere they’d rather be than on a stage. The minor became a major, and Wilbur wrapped up their BFA at the prestigious Boston Conservatory at Berklee College of Music.

Wilbur dived headlong into their studies in Boston, honing their skills in dance, songwriting, singing, choreography, piano, violin, guitar and acting. On their website, they theorize that acting is the “physical embodiment of neuroscience and behavioral observation. Looking back, maybe [I] never changed career paths at all,” they write.

Wilbur took some time out of their exhausting rehearsal schedule ahead of the “Funny Girl” premiere, where they

will play a swing role, to chat about their journey to the stage, why they feel LGBTQ+ representation is critical these days and why they view their neurodivergence as a “superpower” when it comes to their unique role in the production.

## How is your preparation going for “Funny Girl”?

“Funny Girl” rehearsals have been a dream come true and the greatest artistic and physical challenge I’ve encountered thus far. To be in the room with such powerful women leading the artistic team is a rare gift, and it creates a space with infectious joy, bottomless loads of empathy, emphasis on respect, inclusivity, and an incredibly driven environment. I am so lucky that every day when we rehearse, we get to stand in front of at least six women at the tables in the front of the room.

I have idolized Ayodele Casel and Dre Torres in particular for years as a tap dancer first, growing up. The sheer fact that I get to work with my tap and queer idols Ayodele and Dre — who are some of the most innovative and captivating performers, choreographers, artistic geniuses and powerfully humble leaders — is an inexplicable feeling.

This show is my dream show. The tap dance is my dream choreography, the theater dance choreography fills my soul with joy. And this story? It hits home.

## What can audiences expect from the show?

This show is going to be a beautiful evolution from the Broadway version. There are many tributes to the old Vaudeville style of musicals. The show is just bedazzling. My two favorite parts everyone should look forward to, however, are the fact that this show was led and influenced by a female-heavy artistic team and pays homage to tap’s Black history. Having a female-prevalent creative team for “Funny Girl” gives depth and relatability to this female-led



Annaliese Wilbur. Courtesy photo

story. The women on this team — especially the queer, Jewish, Black and Latina women — have been the greatest gift the Broadway industry could have given to this show and any show, in my opinion.

## What does it mean to be a “swing” performer?

My job as a swing calls for

memorizing where each and every “girl” performer is located on stage for dance choreography and scenes, as well as their transitions, lines, vocal parts, entrances, exits, costumes and partner work. It’s quite literally a huge responsibility, but the interesting part is that swings are usually off-stage during all shows. A swing’s true purpose is to be the

emergency glue that holds the show together in states of emergency or low coverage. So whenever you see a little slip of paper in your playbill that says, “At this performance, the role usually played by ‘Blank’ will be played by ‘Blank,’” just know a swing is working their magic!

Being neurodivergent is my greatest strength as a swing for this



show. Honestly, my ADHD gives me the ability to be hyperactive for eight hours straight, use pattern analysis to draw coded diagrams with meticulous detail, and one of the most useful skills it gives me is partial photographic memory to memorize travel patterns and choreography, which has been my greatest blessing. It makes multi-tasking incredibly efficient, which is funny because my ADHD used to make learning and holding my attention for long periods of time one of the most difficult things about my day, especially in school, and I used to feel a lot of shame for not being able to control it.

Now, in rehearsals, my ADHD is my superpower, and I feel incredibly prepared for the eight tracks I cover. I couldn't be more grateful to think differently but also to be surrounded, supported and helped by incredibly driven and creative thinkers such as my co-swings Zoey Lytle, Bryan Charles Moore and Vinny Andaloro.

### How did you wind up going from neuroscience to theater performer?

I grew up with my parents strongly encouraging me to be an engineer or a doctor, so when I started getting interested in theater, they made me a deal that I was only allowed to pursue theater in college if I double majored in musical theater and either engineering or neuroscience.

But after only a month in the neuroscience program at Syracuse University, I knew I wanted to switch to majoring solely in theater. So I began an application to Syracuse's musical theater program and also begged my parents to let me audition for a conservatory. After some convincing from my uncle, my parents allowed me to apply to one conservatory program: Boston Conservatory.

I always love watching people's faces when I tell them I transferred from the neuroscience program at Syracuse University before I pursued musical theater at the Boston Conservatory because their faces always look bewildered. I usually get, "Wow! Neuroscience and theater? Those are polar opposites!" but funny enough, acting to me has always been the physical and emotional manifestation of neuroscience, of psychology.

Behavioral observation, personality traits, mirror neurons, the id versus ego versus superego — they're all incorporated in acting because every living thing on earth has a relationship with other living things around it, as well as needs and wants. I find it amazing that people think acting is lying or that theater doesn't tell true stories. The best theater and acting I've ever seen is when you can't even tell the actor is there because

they have become their character.

That's why I love musical theater so much — theater storytelling combines my passion for musicianship and my curiosity about psychology.

### When did you realize you don't identify along binary gender lines?

The first time I realized I didn't identify along binary gender lines was actually at Syracuse, which I love and miss so much. I joined a theater club for non-theater majors called First Year Players and was cast in the role of Race for their production of "Newsies." Race is a typically male-played, cigar-smokin', sassy Newsie who sings "King of New York" and tap dances.

Still to date, Race is my favorite role I've ever played. Playing Race was my first encounter with gender expression because I remember them offering me the option to play a gender-bent Race in a "Newsie girl" skirt instead of a newsboy if that was more comfortable for me, and I declined because I was happier playing a boy. In many ways, I have felt more like a boy in my life than a girl, speaking in binaries. So I went onstage and got to be a masc-presenting character in pants and suspenders, and of course, a stage cigar.

This was the first time I realized my comfortability in this masculine role had to do with my sexuality too, which had pretty much been undiscovered for 19

Hines, "We do not judge each other, we love each other. If you have a pair of tap shoes, you're in. No dues to pay, not one of those things where you have to tap like somebody else, or tap the way tap must be done. If you want it, we want you." As a nonbinary masc lesbian, this quote is such a breath of fresh air and truly reaffirms why tap dance, in my opinion, is the greatest art form and community on Earth.

### As a nonbinary masc lesbian and public performer, do you think about LGBTQ+ representation?

I think about LGBTQ+ representation in theater and beyond almost as often as breathing. I spent most of the past few years having a hard time finding masculine lesbians and genderfluid people in audition rooms and dance classes — especially the artistic team "behind the table." It's so rare to find inside and outside the theater community, which is why rehearsing with "Funny Girl" is such a blessing. One day, there will be more nonbinary government representatives, more queer people representing leaders in religious organizations and LGBTQ+ people in positions of leadership, power, and mentorship — I believe it.

With today's state, though, we all just have to be patient with ourselves and others, give ourselves grace



Annaliese Wilbur in "Newsies." Courtesy photo

years. "Newsies" changed my life because it reaffirmed my gender expression and was the first positive introduction and intimate interaction I had with queer and genderfluid people.

Reuniting with tap dance in "Newsies," too, after such a long hiatus in high school, saved my life. Tap dancing has always been there for me in my lowest moments. I regard tap dance as being one of the few art forms in the world that is truly genderless and accepting of all people and backgrounds.

In the words of the great Gregory

and forgiveness, lead with love and demand the human protections that are rightfully ours. Representation is always important. Everyone wants to be able to see themselves in TV shows and books and Broadway shows and positions of leadership. It's always a joy to aspire to be someone who you identify similarly to; that's why I geek out so hard that I work with Ayodele and Dre because their representation matters so much to me.

Everyone wants to be seen, and everyone wants to be represented and represented accurately. It is human nature.

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# A Play About Jesus — With Jesus Seen Through the Eyes of an LGBTQ+ Activist

The show's writer, Antonio David Garcia, wrote the play before becoming an atheist



Writer and activist Antonio David Garcia during Sept. 7 rehearsals for “Candy Corn, Christ, and the Convoluted Creation of Golf.” Photo: Brandy Joe Plambeck

## BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

A playwright, executive and LGBTQ+ advocate is unsheathing a unique weapon in the battle against the violence of Christian fundamentalists: a theatrical comedy about Christ. One that is rated NCF — Not For Christian Fundamentalists.

While most of Antonio David Garcia's life has been spent in LGBTQ+ advocacy, theater and the arts have never been far away.

The executive director of Affirmations is stepping down from that role at the end of the year, in part to return to more artistic pursuits. First up he will direct and perform in “Candy Corn, Christ, and the Convoluted Creation of Golf,” a joint production between Affirmations, Ferndale's LGBTQ+ community center, and

The Ringwald Theatre, which is nestled inside the center.

In the production, which Garcia wrote before he became an atheist, he will also play the part of the devil. He told BTL his work is an irreverent but ultimately respectful look at Christianity. As it explores the New Testament story, it assumes that Christ is funny and he and the apostles are BFFs.

## Where art and advocacy meet

Garcia, who attended Northern Michigan University with a musical theater scholarship in hand, said he first fell in love with theater

in elementary school and never fell out of love, though his involvement in the queer rights movement drew him away from the intense involvement that theater demands of its acolytes.

“I've always tried to stay involved in the arts, but most of my attention kept being drawn back toward fighting for our community and the movement,” Garcia said. “It's been a lifelong struggle to really try to figure out how to do more arts and culture while being an executive director.”

He points out that the two endeavors meld philosophically even while time commitments make pursuing both impractical.

“When you think of all the social justice movements and political movements of our time, the arts world has been [at] the front

of those movements,” Garcia said. “They're not mutually exclusive. They're inclusive. When you think about it, oftentimes people — name a politician — after they kill their political enemies, who do they go after next? The artists.”

No stranger to fighting the good fight, Garcia, for years now, has had to fend off religious bigots picketing outside Affirmations. Now, he said, they're showing up with guns and threatening violence in the name of religion.

It was this increased threat that inspired Garcia to dust off a play he had written many years ago and use it to raise money for Affirmations and their new advocacy department.

“What better way to do it than to use a story about the life of Jesus?” Garcia said. “It's a



fight against all this religious bigotry that we're seeing across the country and in our own state. I was like, it's time to take it off the shelf, dust it off and revive it."

## Irreverent and respectful

Joe Bailey, artistic director of The Ringwald, said they are opening this year's season with "Candy Corn" as a way of spotlighting the collaboration between the two organizations that started when the theater company moved into the Affirmations space during the pandemic.

"The people at Affirmations are all such lovely people," Bailey said. "It makes so much sense for us to be there and the benefits have been many. We're still exploring how we can boost the partnership and this show is a first step."

He said he loves that Garcia's play is so funny and irreverent.

"That fits right into our aesthetic," Bailey said. "And it's Dave. What's not to love about Dave? It's so lovely to be able to present his work and have him direct it in this space as he's about to transition out of his current role."

"Candy Corn" was first produced in Ann Arbor at The Performance Network in 2003, directed by Jim Posante. It opened the night the lights went out on the entire Eastern seaboard. Garcia played Simon Peter in that production.

"It was an amazing event and we all worked so hard on it," Garcia said. "We had a sell out. Then we lost our opening night and we lost the next night and I was so devastated, but it was a great run."

At the time, Posante advised him that pacing is its own character, so Garcia rewrote much of it, making it shorter and tighter.

"After the last run, I cut it down as much as I possibly thought it could be cut down," Garcia said. "I thought that was where it needed to be and then I put it up on a shelf and never touched it again until now. I think the best way I can fight back against some of the religious extremists is with a comedy about the life of Christ."

Garcia said he finds irony in being involved with this show because nowadays he is a pretty vocal atheist, the only one of his Latino family who considers themselves an atheist.

"But this show I wrote when I was angry at religion," Garcia said. "I was in Flagstaff, Arizona, a young man backpacking around.

I was sitting next to a campfire alone with my anger. I thought to myself, what if Jesus was a good guy? What if he was funny? What if the apostles around him were his best friends and they were funny and everything has been misconstrued or used to people's advantages like politics?"

He said he probably wouldn't write the same show now, but at the time, he focused on writing a story about the New Testament characters that people know so well. Jesus is still the son of God and he is straight.

Bailey said it surprised him that the show says nothing bad about religion or Christianity.

"It's very pro-religion and not in an evangelical kind of way," Bailey said. "There's an irreverence to it, but it is in no way sacrilegious.

*I thought to myself, what if Jesus was a good guy? What if he was funny? What if the apostles around him were his best friends and they were funny and everything has been misconstrued or used to people's advantages like politics?*

Here's a play about Jesus from a gay man and it was not any of the things I was expecting it to be while still being really funny and just a great show in its own right."

Bailey said he's also very excited to see what Garcia does next because his voice is so distinctive.

While Garcia will no longer be Affirmations' executive director, he will continue to be a part of the organization.

"The plan is that I'm going to do more arts and culture for Affirmations," Garcia said. "We have the theater, we have the art gallery, we have the sky deck. I'm going to work with Affirmations to build a more robust arts and culture program."

Meanwhile, he hopes that people will come out to see "Candy Corn" and have a good time — whether they are religious or not.

"The community needs to know that we all have seen the negative influence of religion against our community for a long, long time," Garcia said. "Even though I'm an atheist now, there are many queer people who are believers and who are spiritual people. They deserve a Jesus story that supports them and loves them."

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## Leader of Anti-Equality Org Thinks Republicans Are Too Cozy with the Queers



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Over Labor Day weekend, my wife and I took a trip to Toronto to celebrate our 26th anniversary. We stayed in what is known as the gayborhood in Toronto. Lots of rainbow flags and crosswalks painted in rainbow and trans flag colors. Lots of dogs (not LGBTQ+ specific, but I always notice dogs because I love them). We browsed a queer bookstore right before drag queen brunch started. We ate at a vegan restaurant called Soy Boys. We saw a flier posted to a light pole that read “Save trans kids” over the image of a red, white and blue flag, clearly calling out the United States for its campaign of harassing and oppressing trans kids. We felt appropriately ashamed.

While checking out the city, we found a little shop that sold jewelry and started looking at rings. Neither of us can wear our original wedding rings anymore because, well, we’re older and not as skinny as we were way back then. We hadn’t planned on getting new rings,

skull, but classy,” I said to my wife, and she laughed. She found a thin, gold, slightly wavy band that she liked.

In the middle of the store, we exchanged rings. My wife asked me if I would marry her; I said yes, and she slid the ring on my finger. And vice versa. It was very informal and impromptu, but it was nice. And it wasn’t lost on us that

where it was legal, the very act of driving back across the border would “unmarry” us.

Before the Supreme Court made marriage equality the law of the land, my wife and I did get legally married in California. Our son was 3 at the time. When we flew back to Michigan, we were as good as not married.

And not married is where right-wing extremists want us to be. Ever since an extremist majority took over the Supreme Court, conservatives have been gunning for every progressive step forward this country has taken. First, it was abortion. Roe v. Wade being overturned energized anti-progressives like never before. And they aren’t stopping at abortion. They want to eradicate the existence of trans people and roll back marriage equality.

I used to write a lot in this column about Brian Brown, the leader of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM), an anti-LGBTQ+ group. The Supreme Court’s 2015 marriage equality ruling really took the wind out of his sails. But now he’s back on his bullshit.

In an email from Brown, shared by Joe My.God., Brown unveils NOM’s new “NOT campaign” and rails against marriage equality, taking Republicans to task for not hating queer people enough to devote their political careers to destroying any and all progressive gains in the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

“This historic campaign will reassert the truth about marriage, life and gender to the American people through aggressive billboard

and digital advertising, challenging the narrative of leftist and LGBT groups — and many Republican politicians,” Brown writes.

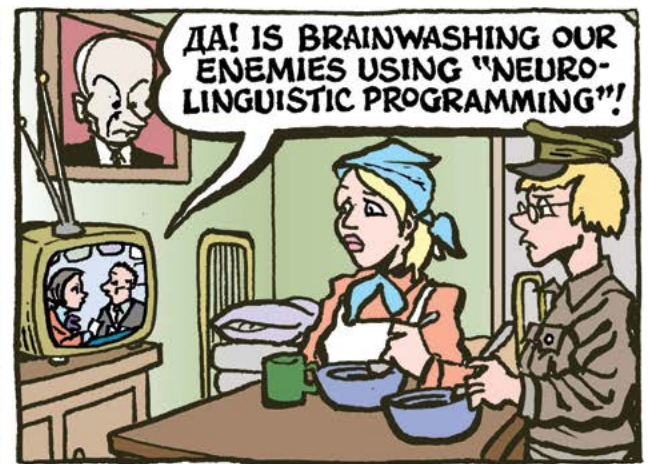
I mean, there are a lot of reasons to go after Republicans. But being too liberal isn’t one of them. The party gets more extremist every day. They worship disgraced former president Donald Trump and donate more money to him with every indictment. This is a party that literally tried to overturn the 2020 election and openly pisses on democracy.

The NOT campaign includes three billboards. A photo of two cake-topper grooms that says, “NOT a marriage,” a photo of what is presumably a transgender woman that says, “NOT a woman,” and a photo of an ultrasound that says, “NOT a choice.”

Brown then begs for money to get these billboards up, calling it “a financial emergency.”

To which I say, no, a “financial emergency” is ending up in the hospital with no health insurance because you don’t make enough money at your low-wage job to buy your own insurance and your employer doesn’t offer it. You also have no paid medical leave, so you lose your job because you can’t come to work because you’re too injured or ill and need to recuperate.

Republicans oppose universal health care, a living wage and paid medical and family leave. This is why people don’t vote for them. It’s not because they are too queer-friendly, that’s for damn sure.



“*Ever since an extremist majority took over the Supreme Court, conservatives have been gunning for every progressive step forward this country has taken.*”

but my wife found the perfect one for me: a gold skull ring that had a skeleton hand where the ring came together. I’d actually been looking for a new ring, and this one was perfect. “It’s a

people in Canada could get married long before we could in Michigan. That had we gone to Canada to get married like a lot of couples did back when it was one of the few countries



Former BTL Publishers  
Jan Stevenson and  
Susan Horowitz  
Inducted Into NLGJA  
Hall of Fame

Jan Stevenson and Susan Horowitz, the married publishers of BTL and longtime local queer activists, were recognized last week by the NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists for their “unwavering commitment to truth, storytelling, and equality.” As “trailblazing individuals,” Executive Director Adam Pawlus wrote in a news release, they have “not only broken down barriers but also illuminated their path towards a more inclusive and compassionate world through their journalism.” Horowitz and Stevenson covered

the triumphs, setbacks and everyday experiences of the Michigan LGBTQ+ community at BTL for more than 25 years before retiring at the end of 2020. The two met when serving as volunteers on the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force before purchasing BTL in 1995 and expanding the monthly 12-page publication into a thriving weekly newspaper covering local, statewide and national LGBTQ+ news, entertainment, politics and more. Even as queer publications across the U.S. closed shop, Stevenson and Horowitz ensured BTL remained a vital lifeline for the LGBTQ+ community in the Midwest and beyond. Today, their legacy lives on in the pages of BTL, which remains the largest, longest-running LGBTQ+ publication in Michigan. BTL’s Ellen Knoppow received the publication’s first NLGJA award in 2022, the Excellence in Transgender Coverage award.



Susan Horowitz (left) and Jan Stevenson. Courtesy photo

Michigan Prevails  
in Catholic Suit  
Over LGBTQ+  
Bias

Three religious entities, including two Catholic parishes and a Catholic healthcare center, lack standing to sue the state attorney general and others in a case focused on Michigan’s newly amended Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, which was expanded to include discrimination protections for the LGBTQ+ community. One complainant, the Grand Rapids Sacred Heart of Jesus parish and its school, Sacred Heart Academy, had argued in its December 2022 filing that administrators would have to make an “unconstitutional and unconscionable choice” to either cease teaching and practicing their Catholic faith or to “close its doors forever.” On Aug. 23, Federal Judge Jane Beckering held that Sacred Heart did not establish standing to maintain their lawsuits. “I am pleased that Judge Beckering has consistently recognized that the plaintiffs’ cases were unsupported by facts,” Michigan AG Dana Nessel said in the statement. “Under Michigan law, religious freedoms are already taken into consideration under the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act when assessing discrimination claims. Our state’s residents can rest assured that Michigan’s recently enacted protections for the LGBTQ+ community will be enforced to the fullest extent as the constitution permits.”



Tove Lo. Photo: Jake Mulka / @JMulka

Bisexual Pop Star Tove Lo Brings  
Bangers to Royal Oak

One of our favorite musical Swedes, Tove Lo, stormed the Royal Oak Music Theatre stage to hypnotic effect on Friday, Sept. 8, performing her dark-pop bops and bangers, including “Grapefruit” and “Habits (Stay High).” Throughout her 20-song

set, the bisexual performer dispensed non-stop club vibes, performing songs from her entire discography, including her 2022 release “Dirt Femme. “Are you ready for some friendship and fuckboys?” she asked the sold-out crowd before singing “Glad He’s Gone.” Were they ever! Just ask the numerous queer fans who showed up in style (hi to the guy in the thong!) to give Tove Lo some gay love.

Michigan Ads Target Red States

A new ad campaign appeals directly to residents in Republican-led states who may be concerned about recent government moves to restrict their “fundamental human freedoms.” The digital ads are running in South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Texas, Georgia and Tennessee and are part of a “concerted effort to attract talent and business to Michigan by highlighting a business-friendly environment that also protects people’s rights and freedoms,” according to Michigan Economic Development Corporation spokesperson Otie McKinley in a recent Detroit News article. “These digital ads in target markets are all about promoting people and personal rights here in Michigan while also highlighting attributes of living, working and thriving in Michigan,” McKinley added.

Local Queer  
Pioneer  
Honored

Oft-overlooked local LGBTQ+ trailblazer Kathy Kozachenko, who served as the first openly gay person elected to public office in the U.S. when she became an Ann Arbor City Council member, will be honored with a statue in front of city hall. Kozachenko was elected as a 21-year-old UM student activist in 1974. The statue is scheduled to be unveiled during the city’s bicentennial celebration in 2024.



Madonna in Tour Rehearsals

Madonna is back in business after a serious bacterial infection led to her admission to the ICU earlier this summer. Rehearsals have resumed for the Michigan-native Material Girl’s Celebration Tour, which had been postponed due to her hospitalization. Madonna posted a “rehearsal photo dump” to Instagram last week, which featured her in an iconic lace corset. Detroit ticketholders can see the postponed tour Jan. 15, 2024 at Little Caesars Arena.





# Deep Inside ‘Red, White & Royal Blue’

Tony winner for ‘The Inheritance’ breaks new records with feature directorial debut

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Pro-queer viewers have spoken, and they’re royally head over heels for “Red, White & Royal Blue.” The film’s widespread success is a win for director and co-writer Matthew López, for Amazon Prime Video and, most notably, for LGBTQ+ representation.

After the gay romance premiered in July, Prime Video reported that the film hit No. 1 on the popular streamer, placing it in the top three of Prime Video’s most watched rom-com films ever. Amazon also noted that there’s been a big uptick in new Prime membership sign-ups due to the buzzy film. Even with what seems like a homophobic R rating, the movie couldn’t be stopped. Consider, also, that this is an unsettling time in our queer history, when LGBTQ+ people are routinely under attack across the world. A hit queer love story on a global streamer is truly a win for all of us.

But before the film, there was Casey McQuiston’s 2019 book. Those who pored over every juicy word in it already had bigger crushes on Alex Claremont-Diaz (Taylor Zakhar Perez) and Prince Henry (Nicholas Galitzine) than they did for each other. Now readers can find new ways to love them in López’s film, where, like in the book, their romance doesn’t begin as a romance — Alex is the son of the U.S. president (Uma Thurman), and Henry is British royalty; they have reputations to uphold. But the two families shift into damage-control mode after something goes awry at a royal event, leading to a tentative friendship between the royal studs. That friendship gradually leads to the bedroom, where more than friendship-type things happen.

Ahead of the film’s release, López, who became the first Latino to win the Tony Award for Best Play for “The Inheritance” in 2021, spoke in depth about his approach to the movie’s sex scenes and how he looked to the “Harry Potter” films to inform his approach to turning a fan-loved book into a film.

**What has it been like promoting this movie without the cast given the SAG-AFTRA union strikes?**

Well, look, working in this business, you wear multiple hats. And the multiple hats that I’m wearing right now are, I’m very angry and I’m very sad. The part of me that’s sad is that I know how much love this film was made with, how much love that was put into this film. And that the cast is such a huge part of the film’s success.

If you are to think of the movie as a success, it’s because of this cast in large



Taylor Zakhar Perez, Nicholas Galitzine and director Matthew López. Photo: Prime Video

part. They deserve to be celebrated. And especially Taylor and Nick deserve to go out into the world and introduce themselves to the world. And I’m sad that Taylor and Nick don’t get a chance to do that.

I’m angry because this strike could have been avoided and it wasn’t. And that ain’t the fault of the actors and that ain’t the fault of the writers. So at the end of the day, I’ll be fine. The movie will be fine. Nick and Taylor will be fine. But unless we get a fair deal from the studios, nobody’s going to be fine.

**From your point of view as director and co-writer, what was it about Taylor and Nick that made them ideal romantic leads for this film?**

They’re just really special. I saw hundreds, and I mean hundreds, of actors for these parts over the course of about five months. And from the moment I met each of them for the first time, they stood out as special. And I saw a lot of really special people, and it wasn’t an easy decision in many ways, but it was indisputably the right decision to go with these two. And we kind of knew it from

the moment we met each of them.

It’s rare that you get one young, dynamic actor giving what is in effect an introductory performance. To have two of them, and to have them both be so individually special, and together jointly otherworldly, is a unique thing. And I recognize that I am a lucky, lucky filmmaker. I am. And it is what makes me sad that I am not here with them, that they’re not here with me. The work will speak for itself. And Nick and Taylor don’t need any more than they’re about to get in terms of attention, but they deserve everything.

**During the film, I was thinking about the conversation around why authentic queer sex is missing from a lot of content. But you give the LGBTQ+ community what we’ve been asking for. What was on your mind when it came to shooting those sex scenes?**

It was really keeping in balance two seemingly diametrically opposed things, which is to be able to deliver authentic-

seeming queer sex, gay sex, and allowing the audience an opportunity to understand something about the characters that they had yet to understand until this scene. So it was sort of like, how do you do both things?

And I also knew that the most important thing, actually, was the characters and that I had to serve the characters’ needs before the audience’s needs. In this scene you have Alex having penetrative sex for the first time with another man. And for Henry, the decision that Nick and I made before shooting this scene was... I allowed Nick to determine for himself the truths of Henry’s past. And there are a lot of things that Nick knows about Henry that I don’t know and that not even Casey knows. But one of the things that Nick and I decided together was this is the first time that Henry is having sex with someone he has real feelings for. So for both of them, it’s an incredibly life-changing experience.

There’s no way to have a life-changing experience without having an actual experience. And so, on the other side of



the equation, I knew working with Robbie Taylor Hunt, my intimacy coordinator, and with Nick and Taylor, the four of us spent a lot of time talking about this scene and what I needed from it and how we were going to do it. And we all kind of arrived at this decision, led by me, that I wasn't going to shoot any wider than the mid-torso because I couldn't sacrifice for a moment the looks on their faces. And so what these two actors were going to need to do was, instead of merely perform a sex act, they were going to act the emotional response to a sex act, which is what I was really interested in telling.

But I also knew that the people watching this film who knew what was going on would know what was going on, and we couldn't cheat. We couldn't flub it. We couldn't deliver anything other than something that was really authentic. So yeah, this was a scene that was devised by a queer filmmaker who knows a thing or two about what's going on in that scene and what I wanted down to the most minute gesture. The thing that Robbie and I talked a lot about is, just the momentary moment of consent for the bottom to say to the top, "Go further."

It's funny because when you start to dissect it, it sounds incredibly schematic, and you don't want it to ever appear schematic. But in fact, this was probably the most carefully thought out, choreographed, edited scene in the whole movie. But I think it had to be in order to get it right. I think hopefully what it does is it allows the audience to understand that sex between two men can be loving, can be tender, can be emotionally connected, as well as being very sexy and physically satisfying.

#### **What would this film have meant to you as a kid?**

This was the movie I needed to see, that I didn't get to see when I was younger. And I say that not to self-aggrandize, but this is the story that I needed to see. That's why I made the movie in the first place. I read the book and I thought to myself, "Where were you all my life? Where was Alex Claremont-Diaz all my life? Where was this beautiful fairytale all of my life? Why didn't anybody think to write a fairytale for me?"

And so, for me, it really was my reaction to the book. I needed to make a movie in response to this book, in some ways, to make it up to young Matthew. Even though it wasn't my fault that these things weren't being made, but I needed something for the younger me to retroactively get. And so even though I had to wait until I was 46 and make it myself, I do hope that this is one of many things that makes life for queer audiences different than the life that I had growing up.

#### **"The Inheritance" came to mind while I was watching this, and both that and "Red, White &**

#### **Royal Blue" are based on books. What were the differences for you in adapting a work to stage versus screen?**

Well, those are two incredibly, vastly different experiences. With "The Inheritance," what I got to do, what I challenged myself to do with "Howards End," is take my favorite novel and reframe it in a queer way. And to take it and update it by 100 years. And examine how much has changed in society, but how little has changed in human hearts and human behavior. And I allowed myself seven hours to tell the tale, and it really was in a way, not just an adaptation, but it was a reclamation, and it was an opportunity to just retell my favorite story in my own way. I knew that with "Red, White," I had a very different set of responsibilities. All respect to my beloved E.M. Forster, there's a slightly less rabid fan base for "Howards End" than there is for "Red, White & Royal Blue." I had many more responsibilities to other people when I was making this film, not just financial.

#### **"The Inheritance" was recently performed here in Metro Detroit. What's it like to see a work so close to you being brought to theaters around the world?**

Especially a play that is so personal to me as that is — it's why you write theater. You don't just write theater for the New York and London audiences. You write theater, you create plays for everyone. And that so many different communities, not just in the United States, but around the world, are getting to see this play, and that it's being translated into so many languages, it makes all the sacrifices that I had to make in order to bring that play into the world worth it.

#### **You made history as the first Latino playwright to win a Tony Award for Best Play. Where do you keep that Tony?**

At my house in London. It's an ongoing debate in my relationship as to where to put the Tony, because we moved into this house about a year ago, and there is this beautiful fireplace mantel. And my husband put my Tony Award and my Olivier Award next to each other on the mantel. And I walked in and I looked at it and I was like, "That's gauche." I was like, "Let's put it on the fourth shelf from the bottom, and let's just let people find it." And he was like, "No, no, no, no. We are proud of this. We put it out there." And so it is sitting very prominently on a mantel in my living room. And sometimes I am proud of it, and sometimes I'm like, "One day I think I'm going to move it to someplace a little more discreet." But for now, he wins.

#### **Proud husband wins.**

Proud husband wins, and it's on the mantel. Once he started installing the spotlight and the lights blinking at it and the seat in front of it, staring up at it, then I do draw the line there.



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# The Black, Gay ‘Michelangelo of Detroit’ Finally Gets His Own Show

Out before the Civil Rights Era, LeRoy Foster created a mural that Detroiters see every day

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Somehow, the late LeRoy Foster, an artist often referred to as the “Michelangelo of Detroit,” has never been featured in a major art show. We can’t be sure if the oversight is because the painter, perhaps best known for his iconic, larger-than-life mural “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,” on view at the Douglass Branch of the Detroit Public Library, was an unapologetically out, gay, Black man long before the Civil Rights era. But soon, Foster’s life and his work will take center stage at an upcoming Cranbrook Art Museum show.

LeRoy Foster: Solo Show will be on display at the Bloomfield Hills museum from Oct. 28 through March 3, 2024. “Foster’s artistic vision did not fit with the art world’s expectations and trends during his lifetime, which left him without representation and also without historic scholarship about his work and practice,” says Chief Curator Laura Mott in a news release about the exhibit. “We have diligently tracked down many of his works, from museums to private collections, and restored others in order to put together the first exhibition that shines a light on this important Detroit artist.”

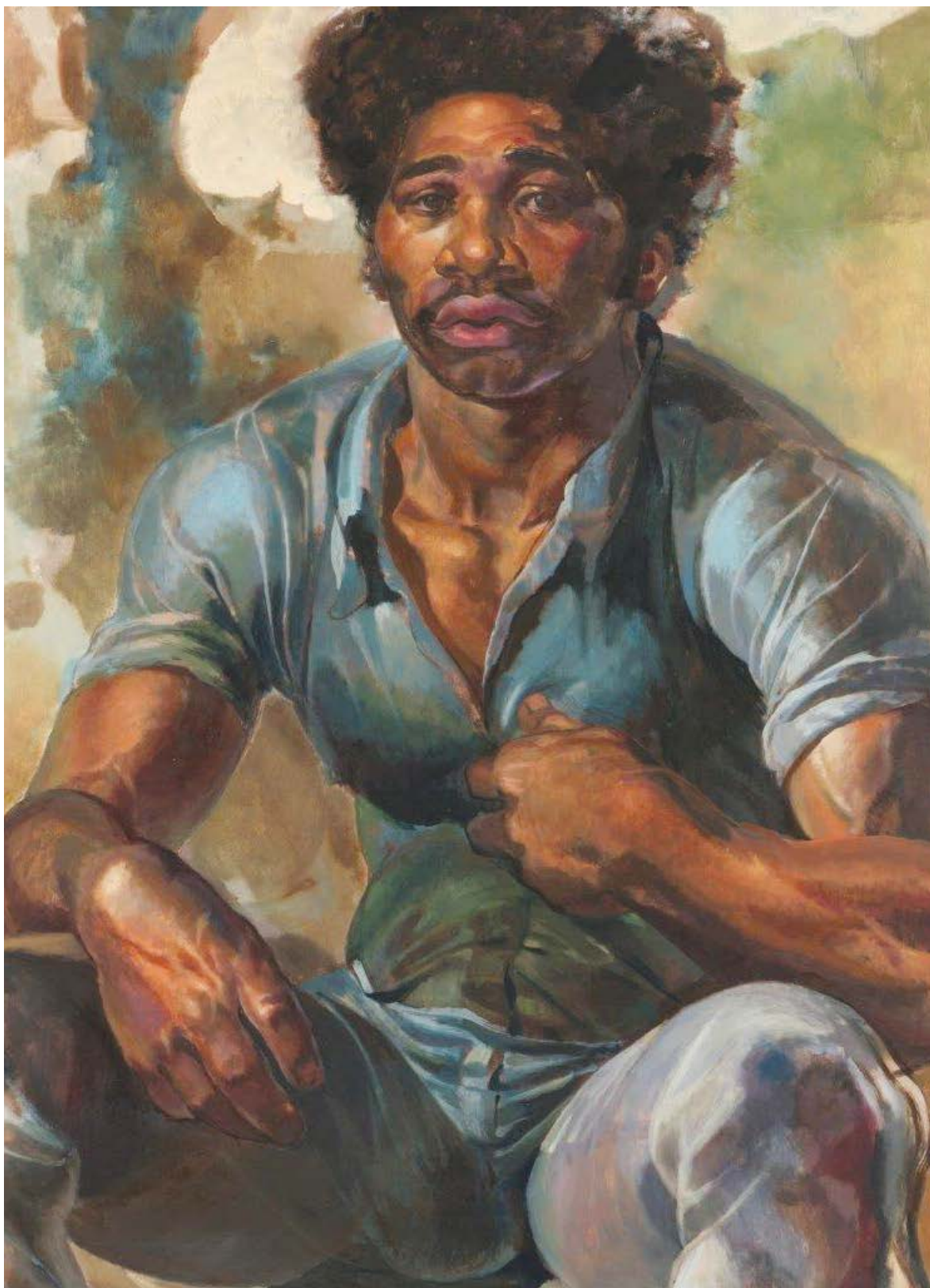
The exhibition will offer visitors the first opportunity to see Foster’s mural “Renaissance City” in public since it was removed from the old Cass Technical High School in 2005. (Foster graduated from the school in 1943.) The mural was rescued from the building before it was demolished and passed into storage, where Mott and Detroit artist Mario Moore uncovered it. The City of Detroit is working to restore the mural, which will be passed along to the new Cass Tech building for permanent display.

As Foster established himself as an artist, he was championed by

several revered Detroit cultural trailblazers, including queer activist Ruth Ellis, artist Charles McGhee and philanthropist Charles Wright. Among his other contemporaries was the late BTL columnist and beloved local artist Charles Alexander, who wrote about an encounter with Foster in a 2019 “Parting Glances” column. “I met LeRoy when I was 19 in 1955 and, sadly, by chance, during the last years of his life in 1992,” Alexander wrote. “In the ’50s, LeRoy Foster’s studio was located in an upper flat on Woodward Avenue in Midtown Detroit. His studio was a few blocks from the famed Paradise Theater that brought top black musicians, bands and singers to Detroit. My friend Jack Jacobs, who was a longtime friend of Foster’s, invited me to attend LeRoy’s 30th birthday studio party.”

Alexander described the party and his conversation with Foster, which focused on their shared Cass Tech teachers. He painted a scene that likely resembled many of the functions Foster attended during that era. “As I recall, LeRoy’s birthday celebration was filled with a diverse group of artists, musicians, and two very hefty twin sisters who sang along with an LP recording of Ella Fitzgerald songs,” adding, “LeRoy was very outgoing and physically in superb shape. He looked not unlike his famous painting — and perhaps masterpiece — of Frederick Douglass.”

In his column, Alexander mentioned a place where those in the know can still find a small remnant left behind by the painter, who died in 1993 — his signature on a wall at the Scarab Club, a place where, he wrote, Foster is “highly honored as a masterful painter, two-spirited power and proud Detroit gay artist of national and international reputation.”



LeRoy Foster, “The Hero,” oil on Masonite, Courtesy: Dr. Darnell and Shirley A. Kaigler






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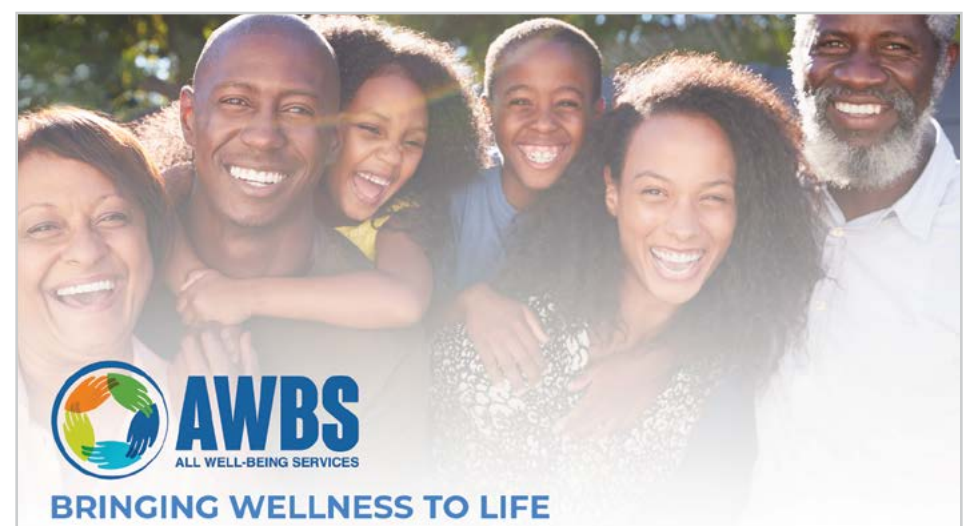
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# This Woman Conductor Keeps Upending Norms

Nan Washburn has been leading the Michigan Philharmonic for 25 years

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

As Michigan Philharmonic Music Director and Conductor Nan Washburn enters her 25th year at the helm of the Plymouth-based fine arts mainstay, she's noticed something about her fellow directors across the country — many more of them are women.

Twenty-five years ago, when Washburn was early in her career and splitting her work between two distinct American cultures (Plymouth and the West Hollywood Orchestra), “there were very few women,” she remembers. This was true even though “I didn't start until I turned 30, so it was a very late start, and there weren't that many women,” she adds. “Now, there are lots and lots.”

Despite a marked increase in women-led orchestras over the past several years, men still dominate the field. A 2016 report by the League of American Orchestras estimated that around 21% of orchestras across the country were conducted by women, and only around 9% had women directors. Demographics aren't readily available to demonstrate how many of those women are part of the LGBTQ+ community, but as a gay woman, Washburn acknowledges she's faced additional challenges. “It's not that it's rare,” she says. “It's just that it makes it that much harder.”

Washburn points to many potential reasons why the road toward gender equality in these elite fine arts roles has been so tough. One is quite simple: the male image of the conductor is deeply ingrained in the culture. “I'm just barely five feet tall,” she says, laughing. “I'm not an imposing figure. And so, it's just a different mindset for people and audiences.” Washburn focuses much of her work on bringing more women into the field, serving as

music director and conductor of the National Women's Music Festival Orchestra each summer in Middleton, Wisconsin since 2016.

The community mindset in historically conservative Plymouth has shifted over the years when it comes to Washburn's family, as well. “Once this community figured it out and met my partner of almost 37 years, Catherine [Byrd], they really embraced us,” she says. “They have been wonderful, and I can't say that would have been possible in other parts of the country.”

Plymouth is no Ferndale or Ann Arbor, of course, but Washburn says progress toward LGBTQ+ acceptance has been steadily improving over the past two-and-a-half decades. “I notice it in terms of visibility — I feel like I see more people like me. It's something I always hoped would happen here, even though Plymouth, for a long time, was very conservative. Now, there's so much more going on, and I think there's a lot more diversity in the population in general, and I love seeing that.”

Diversity-forward programming has been at the forefront of the Michigan Philharmonic Board of Directors' decision-making process, too. “It's why I've stayed so long,” Washburn says. “The board has allowed me to program what I want, and that includes lots of diversity in the programming.”

Washburn regularly seeks out LGBTQ+ composers and performers, including Miguel del Águila, who the orchestra will host later in September to premiere his new double concerto for oboe and clarinet, “Concierto con Brio,” featuring UM Oboe Professor Nancy Ambrose King and her son, Michigan Philharmonic clarinetist Ryan King. Del Águila has visited the Michigan Philharmonic a few times over the years, and while

Washburn recalls him being a “little nervous” the first time he visited the area, “now he brings his partner, and everyone loves them.”

Washburn's leadership has invited national recognition for the Michigan Philharmonic. Since she's been leading the organization, it has been awarded six American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) Awards, multiple Knight Foundation grants and second-place honors in the prestigious American Prize competition in the professional orchestra division. She has also served as the artistic director and principal conductor for the Michigan Phil's Youth Orchestra, which she established in 2003.

Washburn's accomplishments include serving in leadership roles in the Camelia Symphony in Sacramento, the Channel Islands Symphony, the Acalanes Chamber Orchestra, the American Jazz Theater and director of the San Francisco State University Symphony Orchestra. In 2021, she was honored as one of Crain's Notable LGBTQ in Business leaders.

One challenge Washburn is constantly working to overcome is bridging the generational gap. As is the case across the country, most of Michigan Philharmonic's audience skews older. To appeal to younger audiences, the organization offers strong pops programming, including holiday music, outdoor shows featuring smaller ensembles, and events like “Sci-Phonic,” a concert focused on popular anime, sci-fi and fantasy music.

“I think people hear the word ‘symphony’ or ‘philharmonic’ and go, ‘I don't like that,’” Washburn says. “They might think it's too high-brow. And so we're still trying to reach people who might love it if they just came out and tried it.”

Washburn says she is intentional



Nan Washburn. Courtesy photo

about making sure audiences realize she is approachable and that “our musicians are also approachable and wonderful, wonderful players.”

“I just keep hoping we're gonna get more people to experience us,” she adds.

An upcoming Halloween-themed event offers an ideal entry point for the symphony-curious. Set for Oct. 21, “Philharmonic Phright Night” will feature vocalist and

narrator Geff Phillips and a slew of familiar spooky pieces, including the “Jaws” theme, “The Time Warp” from “Rocky Horror Picture Show” and selections from “Corpse Bride.” Washburn is still working out her costume for the event.

*Learn more about the Michigan Philharmonic and the 2023-2024 season at [michiganphil.org](http://michiganphil.org).*



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# A New ‘Madame Butterfly,’ With Hints of Madonna and Björk

Classic Italian opera reimagined by Japanese and Japanese-American creators heads to Detroit



Cincinnati Opera production of “Madame Butterfly.” Photo: Philip Groshong, Cincinnati Opera

**BY MIKHAL WEINER**

This October, an exciting new collaboration sheds a new light on Puccini’s classic opera “Madame Butterfly.” The Detroit Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Pittsburgh Opera and Utah Opera companies have come together to revisit this mammoth of the classical canon, which is set to appear in Detroit Oct. 7, 13 and 15. This time,

though, the production has been reimagined by an all Japanese and Japanese-American creative team.

Puccini’s original work tells the tale of a young Japanese girl, known as Madame Butterfly, who is married off to a young American military man, Captain Pinkerton. The marriage is against her will, but the libretto never really makes an effort to describe her as having a will of her own. Butterfly gets

pregnant. Pinkerton leaves for many years, only to return with an American wife. They’ve come to take the child back to America. Butterfly agrees, but kills herself, “choosing to die with honor rather than live in shame,” according to The Metropolitan Opera’s synopsis.

This version of “Madame Butterfly” has come to be under the direction of the prolific Matthew Ozawa, who was an assistant

professor of music at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance for several years beginning in 2017.

For his take on “Madame Butterfly,” the fantastical, anime-inspired sets were designed by Kimie Nishikawa, while Maiko Matsushima designed the boldly colored costumes. Elsewhere, Yuki Nakase Link has created an otherworldly lightscape that brings

Nishikawa’s sets to life. Indeed, the whole team has been working together to craft an experience that takes Puccini’s work to a modern realm — all while retaining the authenticity of the original manuscript.

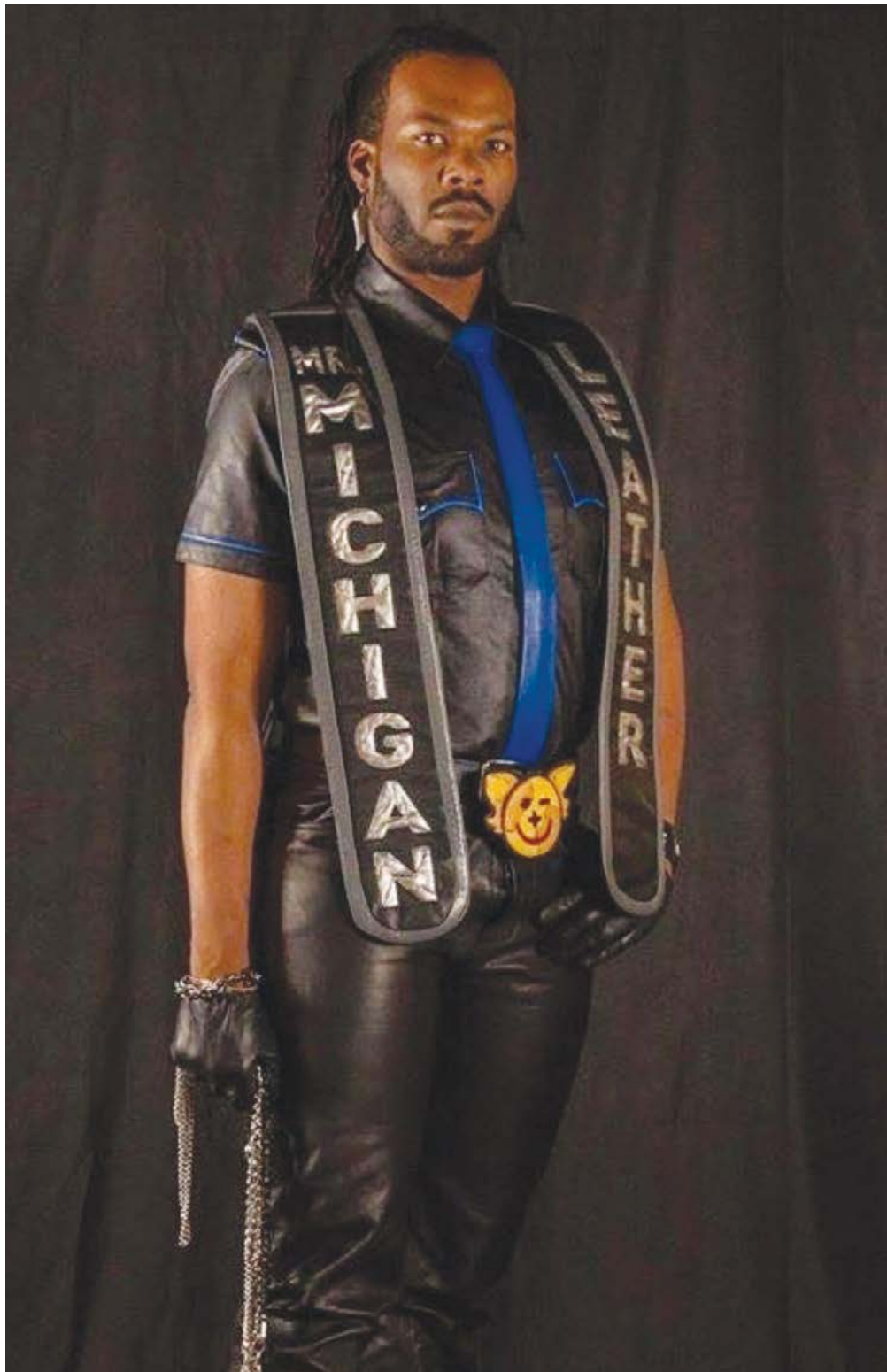
Ozawa has directed “Madame Butterfly” twice before — once in Arizona and once in Santa Fe.

See **Madame Butterfly**, page 34



# Reflections on Black Visibility in the Leather Community

As a new Mr. Michigan Leather is named, 2020 title-holder Tiger Onyx talks about being one of just a few Black winners



Tiger Onyx. Courtesy photo

BY AARON FOLEY

First, let's take a moment to discuss a common rite of passage for queer people that's not always talked about: accidentally stumbling upon a leather or BDSM night at the watering hole. It typically happens near the beginning of being fully out, as you're still feeling your way around nightlife and not knowing "the schedule" yet — when bear night is, when drag queen bingo is. And then next thing you know, you're in your typical fast-fashion T-shirt and jeans and surrounded by a bunch of burly men in harnesses and leather pants. Your only reference to this is that it vaguely looks like a gathering of the Village People.

When it did happen to you (and it did, don't lie), what was the image of those men in harnesses? It's OK if they were mostly white. For decades, many kink scenes did resemble the late director William Friedkin's 1980 film "Cruising" — sleazy, but segregated. A variety of factors, not the least of which included just coming out of the closet, contributed to this. But as recent years have shown us, that's changing.

Tiger Onyx, a Detroit resident and regular at leather nights in the area, was named Mr. Michigan Leather (MML) for the year 2020, becoming one of the only Black contestants to hold such a title. During the upcoming MML, set for Sept. 22-24 in Douglas, a new title holder will be announced as last year's winner Dustin James passes the torch.

Originally held at The Cell Bar in Grand Rapids, MML began in 1995 as

Mr. West Michigan Leather. In 1996, the event changed its name to Mr. Michigan Leather, growing from a single-day event into a full weekend focused on education, fundraising and camaraderie, culminating in the Mr. Michigan Leather Contest.

As for Tiger's victory a few years back, it wasn't something he set out to do, he says, but he realizes the significance of once holding the title even four years later, as more Black queers across the state get into kink scenes.

"We had people of color willing to stand up, and they wanted change when it came down to being title holders," Tiger says. "And running for these titles...how can I put this? When they decided to step up and run

“

*We were tired of being excluded. We were tired of being pushed back. We were tired of being seen as sexual objects. So what other way to make your presence [known] than going in and switching up the situation?*

and were actually able to win, it was time. We were tired of being excluded. We were tired of being pushed back. We were tired of being seen as sexual objects. So what other way to make your presence [known] than going in and switching up the situation?"

Tiger's path into leather was laid well before his adulthood. In 1993, the educational and community-driven organization ONYX formed with the "mission to educate and empower gay and bisexual Men of Color who explore the

See **Tiger Onyx**, page 30

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Flamy Grant. Photo: Haley Hill

# Look What You Made Her Do

How Christian drag queen Flamy Grant turned gay hate into a hit song

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

In this year's Republican war against drag, the plot twist no one saw coming was that Flamy Grant, a contemporary Christian artist and drag queen, would top the Christian music charts.

Now, that's a feat for anyone, not to mention the first time any queen has accomplished this, but it's the story of how Flamy got there that feels like the ultimate clapback in response to the anti-queer religious right. I say that as someone who was made to feel worthless as a gay kid by the Catholic church just for being who I am, but still felt a life-saving connection to God during those tumultuous years through the warm and welcoming spiritual music of Christian music icon Amy Grant, the inspiration for Matthew Blake's "Flamy" persona.

Flamy's rise this summer began when Christian nationalist preacher and far-right Jesus rocker Sean Feucht, who fought against The Walt Disney Company for its support of LGBTQ+ legislation, taunted Flamy and her collaborator Derek Webb on Twitter. It was no surprise when Feucht, a Trump-supporting, anti-masking homophobe, took to social media to call out Flamy, remarking that her existence in Christian music was a sign of the "last days."

Instead, it's just the beginning of days for Flamy, as Feucht's Twitter rant backfired when a heartening show of support for Flamy poured in — so much support that she topped the Christian charts on iTunes with both her No. 1 song "Good Day," featuring Webb, and her No. 1 album "Bible Belt Baby," her 2022 debut. Recently, the North Carolina native was featured in Rolling Stone, Billboard and Entertainment Weekly.

Flamy spoke to me in August about the pressure to suddenly step into the role of LGBTQ+ activist after her instant national exposure, healing her religious wounds with drag and how church looks very different for her these days.

**After soaring to No. 1, you've been featured in national publications. How does this change course for what's ahead for you career-wise?**

When I have a second to breathe, which, honestly, I haven't had a ton of moments where I could just fully decompress and think about everything, and when I have those moments, it's overwhelming. Especially those first couple of interviews that hit. Rolling Stone was one of the first ones, and I just lost my mind to see my face online on their website with a Rolling Stone logo right there. That was mind-blowing

to me. Even being in Paste Magazine was just massive. Hopefully I will still be in Paste Magazine one day for my music and not some controversy started by a conservative worship leader.

But these are big, big moments and the moment's not lost on me. I'm very much aware of how big a deal it is, especially where we are in 2023 in America, where trans folks and drag queens are really the target of so much legislation, so much online hate, so much in-person hate with these protests that are breaking out outside of our clubs and our safe spaces. And so the moment's not lost on me — having a drag queen represented in a space that we typically think of as being for those folks who are against us. I get it. It's a moment for me too. And I hope I'm doing a good job of representing. I can ultimately only



represent myself, but I try to make sure that queer folks are spoken for right now in every conversation that I have, because it's important. It's important right now. Our lives are at stake.

**You have inadvertently and very quickly stepped into an activist role. What has that been like for you, and what kind of pressure are you feeling?**

Yeah, there's definitely a pressure. I mean, I'm a three-and-a-half-year-old queen. There are so many queens who would probably be so much more qualified than me to have these conversations, who've been doing it longer, who know the world better. But in those three-and-a-half years, I have fully immersed myself and I love drag so much. I love this art form. I hate that it took me 35 years of my life to finally get into it and try it and explore it. That was because I'm a late bloomer because of all that religious oppression. It took me so long to even just come out and then another decade to really unpack all of those inherited beliefs and find my freedom and find the love I have for myself today, that I definitely did not have in my 20s. So regardless of when and how it's happening, I am glad that it's happening at a time in my life when I feel more prepared to have these conversations and to speak from a place of love as opposed to a place of pain and hurt or aggression.

I understand the need to fight for our rights, and that is a longstanding tradition in the drag community and just in the queer community in general. We have had to fight hard battles. At the same time, I hope that I at least approach things with just a sense of love at the root and specifically, if nothing else, love for our community. My music, what I do in drag, first and foremost, it's always for queer folks, and particularly it's for queer folks who grew up in the church. That's my primary audience. That's who I'm thinking of when I write songs, and it's a secondary thing to me to speak to the church, to allies, to people who aren't allies, and get our message across in that way. But first and foremost, drag is just a love letter to the queer community that saved me when the version of Christianity I grew up in couldn't.

**How long did it take you to realize that drag was going to help you come to terms with your identity?**

I didn't come out, fully out and proud, until I was 28. My 30s were really about unpacking all of the trauma and the damage done by a religious system that trained me from the beginning, and trained so many of us from the beginning of our lives, to believe that we're worthless. We aren't loved by God, like God can't actually love us because we're so sinful and so bad and fallen and all this doctrine and dogma that is just heaped on us.

As kids, we're told how bad we are, and that is not good footing to start out life on. It's terrible footing to start out life on, and so it takes a minute, at least it did for me, to dig out from under all of that. Lots of therapy, lots of good community and queer community, and having to remind myself and learn how loved and worthy I am. And that happiness is a thing that we get to experience here in this life. It's not a thing we have to put on hold and hope that there's a better thing waiting for us in heaven. Happiness is a thing we create for ourselves now, so that's a lot of what my message is. But yeah, it can take a minute to undo all of that damage sometimes.

**I grew up Catholic. It was intense. You grew up evangelical. Like you, I also did a lot of unpacking, a lot of therapy, a lot of Amy Grant.**

Those are the three levels: unpacking, therapy, Amy Grant. I wasn't allowed to listen to anything growing up that wasn't at our Christian bookstore. That was the music I was allowed to listen to. If I could buy it there, then I could listen, and Amy is the queen of Christian pop. I think that's pretty undisputed. There's not really been anybody else who's had a career like hers, and especially at the time when I was growing up, "Heart in Motion" was just gangbusters, selling like crazy.

So much of her music just imprinted on me, and so even at the age of 37, when I was coming up with a drag name, that just made sense for me. I love the names that are wordplay on

*“So much Christian music is like, ‘Well, we can acknowledge that life is hard in the first verse and in the second verse, but by the time that bridge rolls around, honey, you’d better wrap it up and point it back to Jesus and say, ‘Jesus healed me and saved everything, and it’s all good now.’”*

See **Flamy Grant**, page 32

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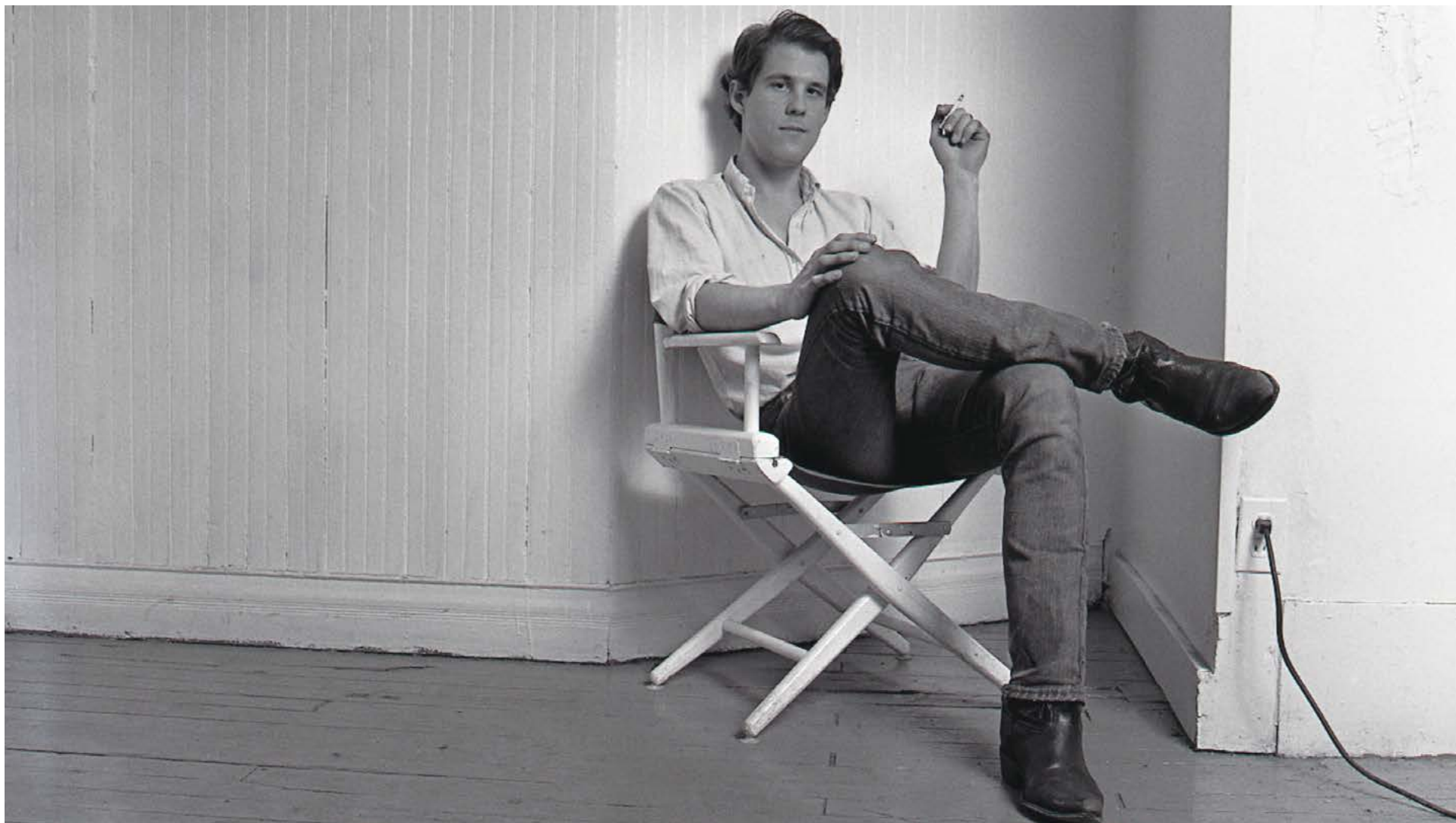


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# Meet Edward Brezinski, a Gay Michigan Artist Who Desperately Wanted to Become Famous

‘Make Me Famous’ doc explores the strange, sometimes sad ’70s and ’80s art scene



Edward Brezinski. Courtesy photo

**BY JASON A. MICHAEL**

You’ve likely never heard of the late, gay 1980s neo-expressionist painter Edward Brezinski, though he was a contemporary of famous artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. A new documentary, “Make Me Famous,” presented by Cinema Detroit at the Scarab Club Sept. 27, explores why, despite Brezinski’s talent and outsize personality, he failed to achieve widespread recognition.

A Michigan native, not much of Brezinski’s early days are known. We do know that his last name was originally Brzezinski, which he changed after moving to New York, and that he was an only child, believed to have grown up in Chesterfield Township. Brezinski’s mother died when he was just a teenager, and his father was a draftsman for General Motors.

For a time, Brezinski lived in Midtown near the Detroit Institute of Arts. He was a regular visitor to the museum and, according to a friend, considered it his sanctuary. When he skipped town is unknown. He headed first for San Francisco, but it was once he’d settled into New York’s then-infamous Lower East Side that he made his tenuous claim to fame.

“The documentary is not intended to lift up Brezinski to the levels of importance as Basquiat and Haring,” said director Brian Vincent. “Rather, it is an opportunity to experience the madcap 1980s art scene through the lens of a striving artist.”

Vincent said that Brezinski’s career parallels the rise and fall of what is arguably the last great explosion of interest in art in New York City. “So his life and career offer us a chance to examine the era and to give the viewer a story

[where] they won’t know what will happen. His career does not outshine the era.”

Yes, the era. The art scene in the Lower East Side, a handful of years before it was the setting of the hit play “Rent” and a handful of years after it produced another Michigan native, singer Madonna.

“I was a little kid when this was happening,” said Paula Guthat of Cinema Detroit. “It’s so fascinating to go back. It’s almost unimaginable what the Lower East Side was like. A burned-out, poverty-stricken area. It’s so expensive now to live where these people were squatting in a building.”

The film, said Guthat, “takes a lot of different themes and weaves them together in this really fascinating story. I think it’s really kind of a feat.”

So, just who was the man behind the

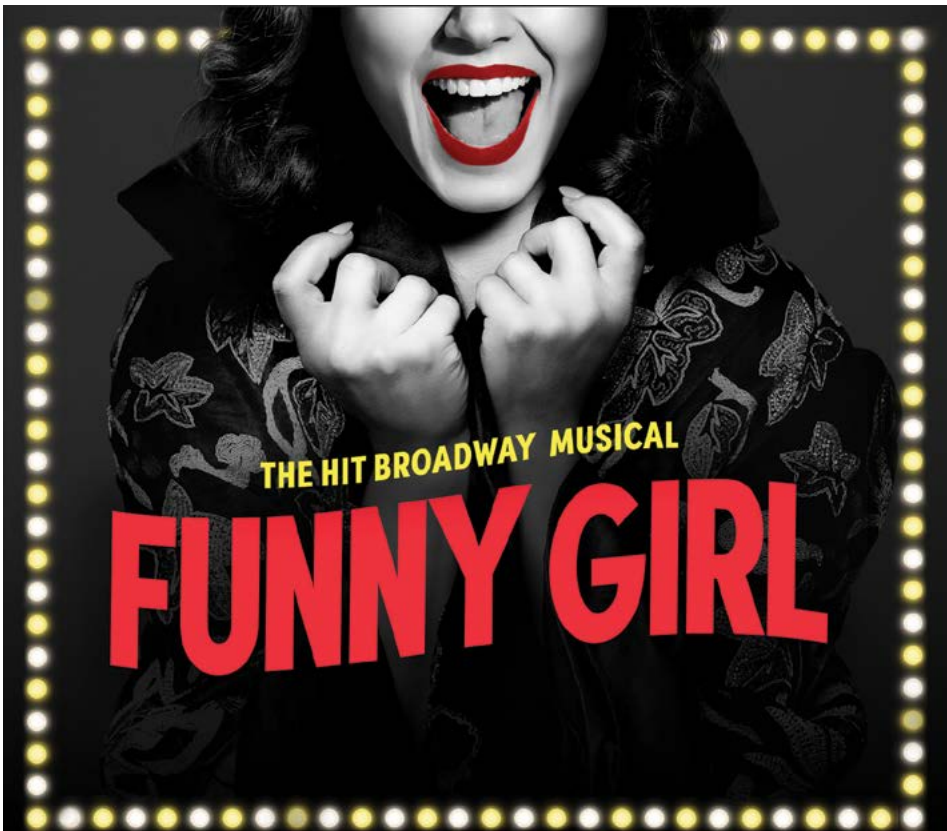
fascinating tale? A tall, good-looking and talented painter who “was gay and fiercely proud to be so,” said Vincent. “He was tough and not afraid to stand up for himself. He was a trained artist who wanted to make a deep impression with his art. But he also had many personality traits that made him memorable, but also held him back in key moments.”

Guthat summed it up like this: “He was irreverent. I think some things he did, it was self-sabotage.”

Guthat tells the story, which is recounted in the film, of Brezinski asking a fellow artist to sit for him twice. Both times, Brezinski destroyed both of the portraits he had created, believing them to be inferior. “He just did

See **Edward Brezinski**, page 32





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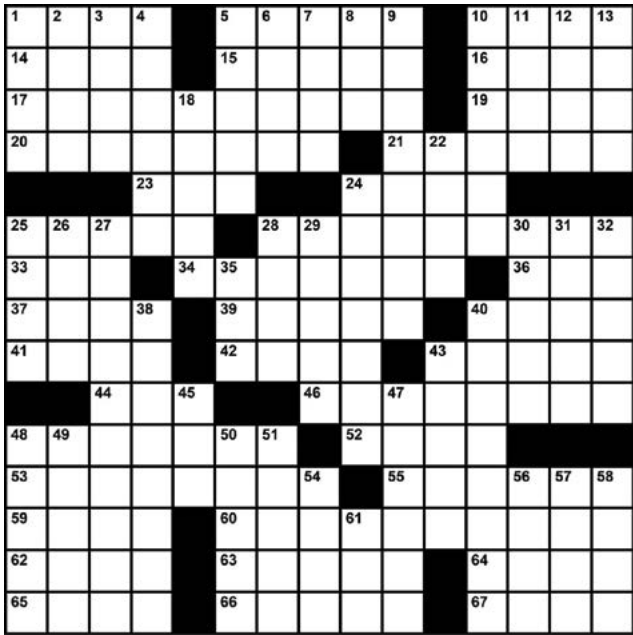
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### Advice to a Kid

#### Across

- 1 With mouth wide open
- 5 Steven Greenberg, for example
- 10 One of the Three Bears
- 14 Gay nightlife district of London
- 15 Hard woody nut?
- 16 Role for Bela
- 17 10-year-old's comment at the National Book Festival to 60-Across

### Q Puzzle

- 19 Get juice from a fruit
- 20 Daily that features pics of zippers?
- 21 A dick investigates them
- 23 Saucer pilots
- 24 Video game name
- 25 Word from Tom Bianchi, perhaps
- 28 Start of the reply from 60-Across
- 33 Abe Lincoln's boy
- 34 They have a top job

- 36 Take care of the bill
- 37 Gay.com and others
- 39 More of the reply
- 40 Robin Williams' home, in "Aladdin"
- 41 No, in Moscow
- 42 "East of \_\_\_\_"
- 43 Cole Porter title city
- 44 Would-be master's test
- 46 Order from Stewart's Picard
- 48 End of the reply
- 52 Word after ass
- 53 Touches up
- 55 Came quickly
- 59 In case
- 60 Transgender thespian
- 62 Lake of Ohio ferries
- 63 "Faboo!"
- 64 Digital-rectal, for example
- 65 Big Apple enforcement org.
- 66 Montreal team of old
- 67 Lorca's boy

#### Down

- 1 "Yeah, right!"
- 2 Score in "Bend It Like Beckham"
- 3 Cry of Dorothy
- 4 Reading for Rev. Troy Perry
- 5 Sounds like Fierstein
- 6 Dull discomfort
- 7 Crude homophobic dude, for example
- 8 Cold response
- 9 On paper
- 10 Load
- 11 Is unlike Dorian Gray

- 12 Zoo barrier
- 13 Octopus abundance
- 18 Rock Hudson's "Gun Fury," for one
- 22 The I's have 'em
- 24 Near the breastbone
- 25 Reveal one's orientation, perhaps
- 26 Madonna, in a creche
- 27 Lethargic words from Ted Casablanca?
- 28 "I'm not in the \_\_\_\_!"
- 29 Stephanie's actor-dad
- 30 Eyeball benders
- 31 Tom, Dick, and Harry
- 32 It's not a mistake at the Red Cross
- 35 Give a chit
- 38 Walked in a cocky way
- 40 Exposed and vulnerable
- 43 Presidential candidate of the '90s
- 45 War zone, in brief
- 47 They buzz when you blow them
- 48 "The Wizard of Oz" scorer Harold
- 49 Like the aroma of some gay bars
- 50 "Love Affair" costar Dunne
- 51 Old message sender
- 54 Smack on the backside, e.g.
- 56 Ankle-length skirt
- 57 Richard of "A Summer Place"
- 58 Barney Frank, in brief
- 61 Simpson case judge

See p. 7 for answers

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## ✦ Tiger Onyx

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leather lifestyle." It has grown to nine regional chapters across the country. Michiganders originally were grouped into the Midwest chapter, but there was enough interest to spin off a Great Lakes chapter that includes Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and Toronto.

In the last 30 years, ONYX has provided a safe space for gay men of color to explore leather. A front-facing objective was to show power in numbers — if a community of LGBTQ+ people of color could form around a kink dominated by gay white men, they could show up and work together toward the common interest. But recruiting shy or reluctant queers into the fold, Tiger says, is just as much of a goal. "Part of my platform as a title holder is to make connections not just outside of the backrooms but the community as a whole."

"There's not a lot of correct information about the leather lifestyle," Tiger adds. "Everybody thinks it's automatically about sex, and the whole hypermasculine lifestyle that is played up in media."

Chalk that up to, well, maybe the innuendo of the leatherman in the Village People, the rough trade in "Cruising" and the general Tom of Finland-esque image of what leather suggests. It's more than sex, Tiger says, but even then, the enjoyment of consensual sex shouldn't automatically be a disqualifying factor. And even then, sex doesn't even have to be the No. 1 driving factor; as with most kinks, it's not a requirement. In the end, it's always about community and expression.

"Leather is what you make of it. Some people are here for the rituals and traditional side of it. There is a spiritual aspect to leather and BDSM," he says.

Among Black members of the LGBTQ+ community, Tiger understands why there is hesitation. That's mainly because even as groups like ONYX and Black titleholders exist across many scenes, visibility is still lacking.

"There's the taboo in our community... there is not enough information about it," Tiger says. "The people who are interested in it, they're scared of it — it's hush-hush."

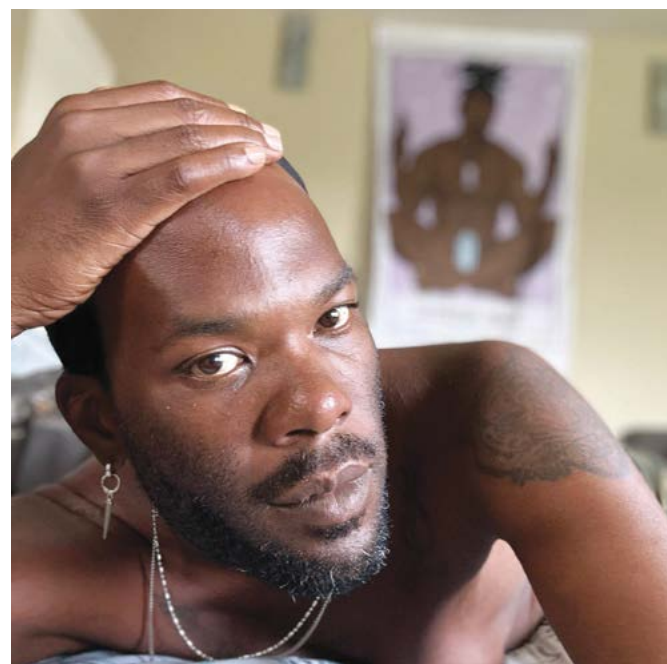
The look of leather is changing, which is something Tiger is confronting head on. Brimmed leather caps, harnesses, chaps and leather jocks — in all black — will, of course, remain a community mainstay. But increasingly there are other fashions entering

the fold, and not without some pushback.

"When I came out, even with the start of my title year, my look was bodysuits and fishnets and mesh — which is fetish attire, right?" Tiger says. "I was considered more of a kinkster than leather [person]. When I won, I was attacked because you have the option of your jock and harness or fetish attire, and I wore a white fishnet bodysuit. A guy on the internet was like, 'How are you representing a man looking like that? Are you even a man? Do you even have a penis?'"

But, Tiger says, "Honestly, now in 2023, it's more accepting than it was in 2019. A lot of that is because people's tastes are changing, style is changing. We've argued and showed up and represented enough to wear your mesh underwear and harness."

The ultra-butch identity is also evolving.



Tiger Onyx. Photo: Facebook

"You didn't see a lot of non-binary people in leather, and now it's here," Tiger says.

To bring it back to a local level, Tiger says a major source of friction was when the West Michigan leather community first merged with the Detroit-area leather community to form the Mr. Michigan Leather community.

There's not much more to be said about the statewide divide that exists everywhere; the western side of the state is more white, and often more conservative, while the eastern side has the Blackest city in the country. Years after the two merged, there is still optimism around Michigan as a whole to tap into the power of numbers; after all, it's not only about winning competitions, but fostering a sense of community around a lifestyle that is persecuted at large.

"We need to continue to move forward," Tiger says. "For those of us who are new coming in, they need to be open to the traditions that are there. And for those of us who have been there, they need to be open to new ideas, because that is the only thing that will keep us moving forward."







## ◀ Flamy Grant

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your favorite diva, like Tina Turner or Chaka Khanvict. Those kinds of things just tickle me. I love it. And so I wanted something in that realm. And when I said “Flamy Grant” out loud to my husband and he laughed — and my husband does not have all the religious trauma that I do — I was like, “Oh, if my husband can laugh at this, then I know there’s a whole generation of church youth group kids who are

just going to be like, ‘Ah.’” And I wasn’t wrong.

**A lot of gay Amy Grant fans have been following her for many years, and for a lot of us who felt a lot of fear and shame within the church, her music just always felt like a safe place. And through that music, so did she.**

Absolutely. It’s kind of a universal experience that we have, especially as queer boys. We bond with a female icon. I think there was a subset of us who were growing up in the church and Amy was that person. She filled that role for us. And I didn’t even know what queerness



Flamy Grant. Photo: Haley Hill

was until I was much older because I was so sheltered, but I knew I was different and I knew that there was, like you said, a safety in what Amy was doing, and I just loved her music so much. Memorized the albums front to back. She spoke to us in a way that it created safety and it created hope for what our future could look like.

**If you ever do meet Amy and get a chance to perform with her on the same stage, what’s a song of hers that you clung to as a kid that you would want to perform with her?**

Let’s pick a whole album. My favorite Amy album is “Behind the Eyes.” It spoke to me at a really specific time, because I was in high school when that one came out, and it was the first time I heard a recording by a Christian artist where it just let me sit in some of the sadness and some of the pain. The song was there to facilitate a space for pain because so much Christian music is like, “Well, we can acknowledge that life is hard in the first verse and in the second verse, but by the time that bridge rolls around, honey, you’d better wrap it up and point it back to Jesus and say, ‘Jesus healed me and saved everything, and it’s all good now.’”

**Are you still involved with the church?**

Well, I’m not involved with a local church anymore. I don’t have a home church now. My church that I served at for the past eight-and-a-half years as one of the worship leaders was awesome. Very progressive, affirming, inclusive, all the things, but it closed down last

year. It was kind of a casualty of the pandemic. So for me, it’s actually been a wonderful transition. It’s the first time in my life I have not had a church service to put on on Sunday mornings. I’ve always been involved in the making of church from high school... well, even younger, honestly. And I’m loving it. I love gay brunch on Sunday, and I am not ready to give that up anytime soon.

**I mean, let’s be real. That is church for some.**

It is church, absolutely. And I gave the first half of my life, literally 40 years, to the church and not just as an attender. Like I said, I’ve been on church staffs at megachurches, I’ve been a church planter, and I’ve mostly just been a worship leader since high school, and that’s plenty. I’ve given plenty, and now it’s time for me to do something else, and it seems like the thing I’m going to be doing is singing songs in drag.

**It seems like you’re in a place now where you’ve worked through it yourself and now you can help other people do the same.**

I think that’s my hope. I hope that my music does that for some folks, and I hope that even the queer kids who are being sheltered the way I was and kind of isolated from the world, I still found ways to find things that my heart and my soul were hungry for. And so a drag queen’s not going to speak to every queer kid, but for some of the kids, she will, right? There are kids out there who are going to see what I’m doing and they’re going to be like, “Oh, that speaks to me. That gives me hope for a future that could be mine one day.”

## ◀ Edward Brezinski

Continued from page 26

things every so often that don’t make sense. He seemed to be a bit troubled. He wanted fame, but he also did things that sort of guaranteed he would not become famous.”

Brezinski hurt his cause — his quest for recognition and fame — more often than not. Though mental illness is not brought up in the film, a study of Brezinski’s actions makes it appear that it could have been an issue. Then there is the question of his art. Was it actually good enough to make him famous?

“Through the lens of his life, we’re looking at a few important questions,” said Guthat. “One of them is why certain artists succeed and become ‘famous,’ and others don’t. Also, how people are remembered. There are all sorts of amazing interviews in the film with people who were there. They kind of contradict each other, and that’s fascinating.”

So fascinating that Vincent, who studied acting at Juilliard, and his

partner and wife, producer Heather Spore, who starred in “Wicked” for a decade, decided to take on the role of filmmakers to tell his story.

“We began researching his career and why didn’t he get famous, and we went out into the community of artists from the 1980s and we met them,” Vincent said. “They hadn’t thought of Edward in years and were sort of flabbergasted we were interested but relieved it wasn’t about Basquiat and Haring, who they were used to fielding questions about.”

Vincent and Spore discovered a trove of never-before-seen videos that Brezinski had encouraged a videographer, Jim C., to film in the ’80s. Also, “there were mysteries about him that could only be solved by investigating. And that’s when we knew it was a movie and not a play, and that’s how we became filmmakers,” said Vincent.

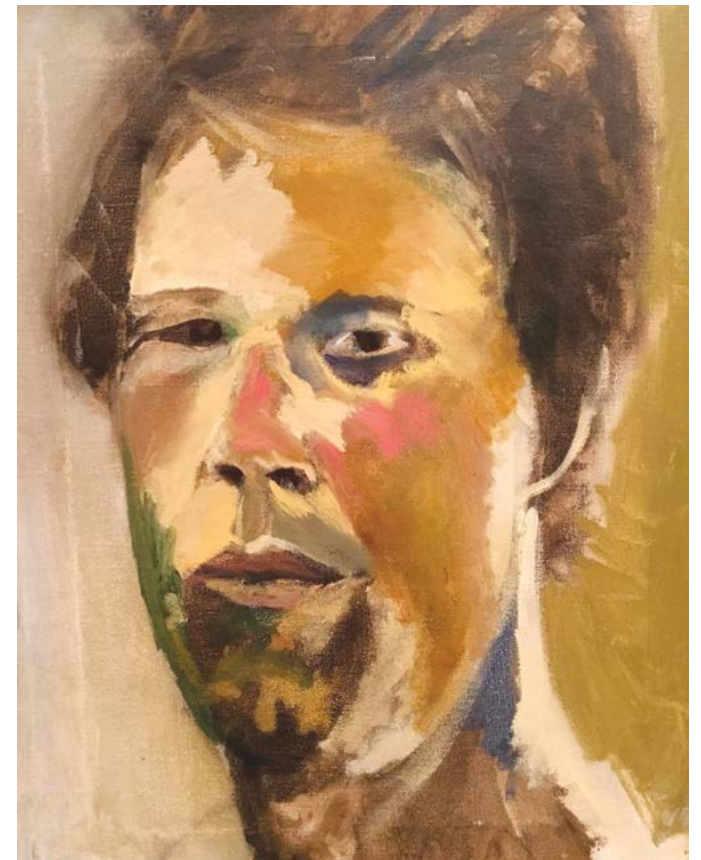
The result is a film The Guardian called a “touching documentary [that] revisits the grimy Manhattan of the ’70s and ’80s in search of long-lost painter Edward Brezinski.” But it doesn’t only explore the mysteries of his beginnings, but also his curious ending. His body

was allegedly discovered deceased in France in 2007. The filmmakers travel to the French Riviera looking for Brezinski’s grave and his illusive death certificate, causing viewers to wonder if he actually faked his own death.

In the end, viewers are left to their own devices to decide Brezinski’s artistic merit. His struggle was certainly not unique.

“I think there is a heroism within artists,” said Spore. “The fact that they get up every day and create art is a wonderful thing for our society. This is a story about a local Michigan artist that made a deep impression on his community of artists that he worked alongside. It is a humorous and touching story of a man versus himself. That is something every artist can understand.”

*A special screening of “Make Me Famous” will take place Wednesday, Sept. 27 at the Scarab Club, located at 217 Farnsworth St. in Midtown. Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased in advance at [bit.ly/464tkLj](https://bit.ly/464tkLj).*



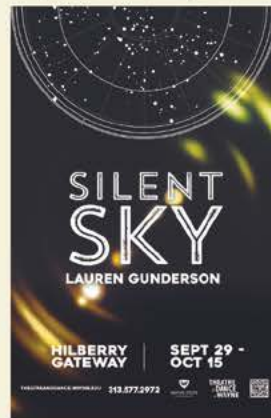
Edward Brezinski, “Self-Portrait” (1976). Courtesy photo



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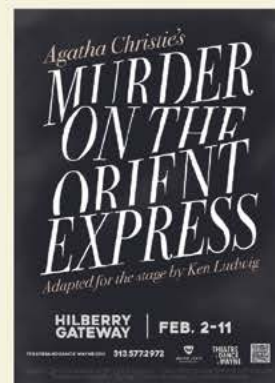
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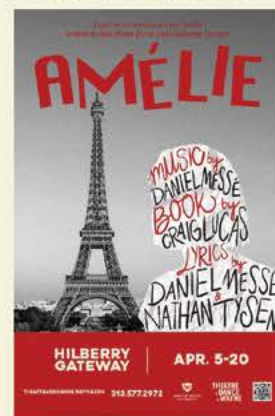
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Cincinnati Opera production of "Madame Butterfly." Photo: Philip Groshong, Cincinnati Opera

## ◀ Madame Butterfly

Continued from page 21

Both times, though, he was working with existing set designs, which limited his ability to interpret the work in a way that took on its most challenging aspects: the ways in which the work depicts Japan and Japanese culture through a stereotypical and superficial Western gaze. Not to mention the fact that, through the ages, productions have almost always been performed, designed and directed by an entirely white cast.

"I knew that to do this I would need to do an entirely new production and I'd want to bring in an entirely Japanese female design team," Ozawa tells BTL, "and it was really the safety of our collective collaboration that enabled us to go on this journey. It was emotionally taxing and difficult to finesse the direction we [wanted to take]. We felt an immense amount of pressure to do right by the Asian-American community and the Asian community, to reclaim and reimagine this piece [in a way] that would allow diverse audiences to feel welcome in the theater."

To that end, Ozawa's team has set "Madame Butterfly" in a modern-day American city. Pinkerton is reimaged as a 20-something gamer guy who loses himself in a virtual reality (VR) sequence, wherein he falls in love with a simulated woman — Butterfly. This new framing allows the team to produce the opera without changing the libretto or the music. It was, after all, written as a European fantasy about Japanese cultural norms (Puccini never stepped foot in Japan, for example). As a VR simulation, that illusion is shown for what it always was: An outsider's view of something far more complex and nuanced.

"I researched both authentic Japanese garments and Japanese-inspired garments while creating the costumes," says Matsushima, "Think of Jean-Paul Gaultier's 1999 design for Madonna or Alexander McQueen's 1997 design for Björk. These are Japanese kimono-inspired garments, as understood by the Western eye. The more I understood how designers have distorted traditional Japanese kimono silhouettes, colors, and fabric to be legible and recognized as Japanese garments, the more I felt clear what we're doing. We

want it to be clear that this is a fantasy view of Japan, not a representation of actual Japanese garments or culture."

The team behind this reinvigorated "Madame Butterfly" is interested in challenging the various binary

*The team behind this reinvigorated "Madame Butterfly" is interested in challenging the various binary assumptions inherent in traditional operatic settings.*

assumptions inherent in traditional operatic settings. East vs. west, masculine vs. feminine, good vs. evil — none of these are truly binary paradigms that can be taken at face value. By showcasing the absurdity of viewing a full, rich society as a superficial daydream, by making Pinkerton the pitiable one, by contrasting the vivid colors of the VR simulation with the mundane gray palette of the everyday, they are inverting power structures. They are, in essence, queering the tradition.

"We want to welcome everyone into the Opera House, but I realize there's a risk in telling a story differently than the way it has traditionally been told," says Ozawa. "I was nervous on opening night! The experience of people leaping to their feet and cheering immediately when the music ended — that's something I actually have never experienced with any piece I've ever directed. I realized, in that moment, the true power of live storytelling. It's so visceral and impactful. That's why we do it."



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