

# CULTURED SUB-CULTURE

## His wrists are sealed

When was the last time you saw a gay comic? No, Gordon Shadburne doesn't count. Can't think of any? Well, the truth is that openly gay comics/performers are something of a rarity in show business. Sure, there was Paul Lynde and Liberace and Rock and now there's Wayland Flowers and Charles Nelson Reilly, but none of them are candid about their gayness — either while they perform or during their chats with Johnny or Joan. Well, thank goodness those days are over! Enter Tom Ammiano.

Tom who? Alas, the name does not come trippingly off the tongue invoking instant recognition amongst peers. Actually, outside of San Francisco, New York and gay cruises (on *ships*, that is), Tom Ammiano is one of gay show biz's best-kept secrets, which is a shame because he's such a fresh, incisive wit. But his time will come. After all, there was a time when blacks weren't allowed to be mainstream comedians and that's hardly the case any more. Unfortunately, homophobia in show biz, as in the "real world", continues to rear its ugly head; fortunately, performers like Tom Ammiano cannot be kept down or in their place, so just give him some time. As he stated recently in an article in the *Advocate*: "An openly gay comic runs into harassment all the time. For gay comics, the challenge is to play rough, yet not break any nails... what's a queen without tenacity?"

Ammiano illustrates this point in his one-man show, *Wrists*, an uncompromising comic autobiography. Everything about gay survival in an anti-gay America is explored in the play, which has garnered rave reviews in San Francisco and New York. Naturally, Ammiano doesn't leave out one detail from his decidedly *fabulous* life. Early in the show he discusses his birth, declaring that he came out wrists first. After all, there he was, a star making a grand entrance under all those lights, with the eyes of the audience rivetted on him. "I had to come out wrists first with

my hands covering my head and face," he says. "What else could I do? I didn't have time to put on my stage make-up." A queen is born.

Like most manic, transplanted East coasters ("I feel no overwhelming need to dialogue, give space, be mellow or floss chakras"), Ammiano hails from New Jersey. Although he's resided in San Francisco for more than twenty years, his Garden State years continue to influence his life. In fact, the first act of *Wrists* deals largely with his Newark up-bringing. It's all there — from his first teacher in Catholic school, Sister Nazaretta (aka Sister Nazi), to studying shouting as a second language, to describing the pain of masturbating with a rosary around his fist. It's gutsy, irreverent and probably offensive to certain elements of the gay community. But it's real; a way of taking the hurt and anger of living in a homophobic society, turning it around and transforming the painful truths into laughs. It's a revolutionary approach when one considers how gays in show biz have fared up until now. So-called "sissy types" have been a mainstay in films and TV, from Edward Everett Horton to Jerry Lewis to Pee-Wee Herman. They're amusing to a mass (read: straight) audience as long as they don't threaten them with overt references to their sexuality. Tom Ammiano could never fill their pumps and follow in their footsteps; he's too busy pioneering a new course for out, gay performers, one in which they can be honest and open with their audiences and still be wildly entertaining.

It's a chancy venture and it takes a lot of nerve, but then Tom Ammiano is from Newark, New Jersey, so the worst is behind him and the best is yet to come.

**Howie Baggadonutz**

(Ed. note: Tom Ammiano is tentatively booked for a Portland appearance in September.)



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*Nice*