

just entertainment

The mother of gay comedy

Of Tom Ammiano's Wrists, one reviewer said, 'It's like growing up gay in America.'

BY HOWIE BAGGADONUTZ

I got his phone number from Lea DeLaria. "What the hell," I figured, I was going to San Francisco and I wanted some interviews. It couldn't hurt to call him up and ask him to meet me for coffee. Besides, we had lots in common — I was a funny fag, he was a funny fag and we were both from Newark, New Jersey, (my parents had sense enough to move when I was two).

When I arrived in San Francisco I began to get cold feet. After all, this was a major city, not Puddletown, Oregon. Maybe people were always calling him up for favors. Would he offer me some curt, lame excuse as to why he couldn't be interviewed? Would he hang up on me? Would he tell me to fuck off (he is from New Jersey). Perhaps name-dropping would help. I could tell him about the great times I had shmoozing with Lea and Romanovsky and Phillips. After all, they all got their start together at a club called the Valencia Rose. Maybe evoking a fond remembrance of days gone by could be just the ticket to get him to talk to me.

"Don't be such a weenie," I told myself. "just do it." I picked up a phone and dialed. It rang. He answered. I babbled — Queersville, Portland, comedy, an interview? "OK," he said "meet me at Cafe Commons tomorrow at 1:30." Neat. I was going to meet Tom Ammiano, the "mother of gay comedy."

I first saw Tom (I call him Tom now) in the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*. He was the school teacher who wept as he recalled the day Milk was murdered. Subsequently, I'd seen publicity photos of him in San Francisco's gay papers for the plays, *Two Queens in Search of a Motif*, which he co-authored, and *Wrists*, which he wrote and will bring to Portland September 11 and 12.

We met at Cafe Commons at 1:30 the following day. It was crowded with noisy leftists nursing cups of coffee. We chatted briefly and I made a point of telling him I was from Newark. That clinched it. "I love New Jersey boys!" Tom exclaimed as we left the cafe and headed back to his apartment for coffee and interview.

HB: How long have you been doing comedy?

TA: I think I've been doing comedy since I sat around the table with my mother and sister in Newark, but professionally, standing up so people could throw things at me, about five and a half years.

HB: What did you do before comedy?

TA: I've been a teacher in San Francisco for a long time and I was involved in starting the Gay Teacher's Coalition when we had all that Briggs stuff years ago. I also ran for school board as an out faggot and we did pretty well. But politics takes a lot of compromise and I thought when the election was over if I was going to run again and win I'd have to start that minute so instead I

turned to comedy.

HB: Do you foresee doing gay comedy in the future or do you want to appeal to a broader audience?

TA: Cross-over audiences are what I really believe in; I want it for myself and all the other out gay performers who want it, too. I have done it — I was the only faggot in the San Francisco comedy competition. When it works it works really well — the straight audience congratulates itself on being able to deal with it all and you feel terrifically affirmed in what you're doing because you've crossed over. But it's hard. San Francisco's comedy establishment is white, male and heterosexual, but there's also a closet mentality. I know a couple of booking people at established comedy clubs who are closeted and they're afraid to have us. I have played these clubs and with success, which is the real bitter pill, because even though you're as good as the straight comics, and many times better, they still don't book you back. They'll say, "Oh, you're funny but don't do the gay stuff, stick to the Italian." And, of course if you dare say homophobia they say, "Oh, no!" and they trot out some gay friend.

HB: Who makes you laugh?

TA: I used to laugh at Steve Allen's skits. Lily Tomlin makes me laugh, too. I love Richard Pryor — I love his anger. And I like him, too, because he apparently got in trouble with this anti-gay remark and he later apologized and admitted he was way out of line. I really like that; you're not going to see that with someone like Eddie Murphy.

HB: What are some targets in the Bay Area you make fun of?

TA: Oh, the mayor Diane Feinstein with her basic "Planet of the Apes" hairdo. And, of course, universal things like the phone company, homophobia, Ron and Nancy. They asked Nancy what she thought of El Salvador. She said, "Oh, you mean that Spanish dress designer with the puffy sleeves." I also talk about my Italian up-bringing in Newark and things that happen to me now. I especially like topical subjects. I can sit down with a newspaper and come up with lots of things. I like to write; I do my own writing, although it's the most anguishing part.

HB: What's *Wrists* about?

TA: It's my one-man show, a "play-lette," but it's thorough stand-up. I use slides and a home-movie, as well. One reviewer said it was like growing up gay in America.

HB: You didn't grow up in America, you grew



Tom Ammiano

up in Newark!

TA: Right! I should've said that!

HB: Is there anything you'd like to share with the readers of *Just Out*?

TA: Support your local gay performer. If there's no place in your community for out gay people to perform then make one. We did it here and you can do it — the more closeted people stay in show business on any level the more it hurts all of us. Quality, out gay performers should be making their living like out, straight performers.

Tom Ammiano will appear in *Wrists* September 11 and 12 at 8 pm at the Columbia Theater, 2021 SE Hawthorne. A portion of the proceeds will benefit the Cascade AIDS Project. Advance tickets are available at CAP's office, Music Millenium, C.C. Slaughter's, Artichoke Music and A Woman's Place Bookstore.

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