

# Not on the back of this bus

Tri-Met's ad agency refuses to allow Snickers LaBarr to advertise on back of a bus

by Margaret Deirdre O'Hartigan

Priscilla isn't going to be the only bus transporting drag queens—not if Portland's Snickers LaBarr has anything to say about it. Snickers, whose male alter ego is Jerry Kallioinen, hosts a late-night talk show on cable TV. A decision by some of her fans to kick off the program's third season of regular programming with an advertisement on the back of a Tri-Met bus has unexpectedly turned into an issue of free speech.

To date, the fans' efforts have run into nearly as many snags as meet the hapless drag queens trekking across the Australian outback in Stephen Elliott's film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The placard, or "tail" as it's called in advertising parlance, for *The Snickers LaBarr Show* was produced by a professional sign company to meet Tri-Met requirements—but has yet to be hung on a bus.

"When we submitted the advertisement to Obie [Outdoor Advertising]," recounted Kallioinen, "they led us to believe they forwarded that work order immediately to Tri-Met and that it was evaluated there for 10 or 12 days.

Obie [Advertising] contacted us again, stating that Tri-Met had decided to reject the advertising and the sign because it did not feel it reflected 'family values.' "

"Obie [Advertising] also said there would be no formal letter of rejection and that this was strictly a verbal denial," he said.

Kallioinen then learned that the project was derailed before anyone at Tri-Met ever saw it.

Obie Outdoor Advertising, which handles Tri-Met advertising, was initially closemouthed about the entire affair. Staffer Brad Falk claimed the Snickers tail "was not rejected per se," but refused to elaborate. "It went out of my hands. I didn't get to sell it, and I didn't get the commission," he said. Any additional information, he insisted, would have to come from his boss, Brian Obie.

Obie proved difficult to reach—failing to return telephone calls and being unavailable when telephoned—until the day after Tri-Met public affairs officer Steve Johnson was asked for comment on the tail and expressed complete ignorance on the subject.

Obie initially emphasized the impracticality of buying just one placard out of the hundreds on

buses all over town. "We would not recommend that they buy one tail."

Then was that the reason Kallioinen's placard was rejected? "That's not the reason," Obie said, and explained the placard violated Obie Advertising's guidelines on "family values."

When asked to specify which particular guideline the Snickers tail violated, Obie said, "It's been a month now since I looked at that ad. I can't even recall what it looked like."

Was the ad rejected because the show's host is a female impersonator?

"I didn't know who the host was—female or male impersonator."

Neither Obie nor Johnson articulated even a single "family value" guideline when asked for specifics.

Obie maintained his firm was reconsidering the sign, and that a decision would be made "by the end of the week." The end of the week came and went, however, and Kallioinen received no word of a decision.

Even without bringing up the rear of a Tri-Met bus, Kallioinen's Snickers LaBarr is no stranger to

many Portland residents. Prior to hosting her own talk show, she and other of Kallioinen's creations appeared for five years at Darcelle XV show bar while Kallioinen was a regular cast member there. And before that, Kallioinen spent a year at the Embers' Sunday night cabaret.

About his Snickers persona Kallioinen says, "I personally view that character as a job, as well as a theatrical creation." The advertising on the bus "was to attract more viewers to the show."

It is the censorship aspect of Obie Advertising's rejection of the Snickers ad which has Kallioinen most concerned. The placard met all of Tri-Met's technical requirements, was in good taste, and didn't even refer to Snickers being a female impersonator.

He says, "It's really scary that certain individuals still are able to make judgments, discriminate, and interject their personal value system—especially in places of power."

The Snickers LaBarr Show can be seen on Paragon Channel 34, Multnomah County Television Channel 21, Cable Access Network Channel 11, and Tualatin Valley Cable Access Channel 59.



Snickers LaBarr

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