

DIVERSIONS

Out



Queen Mensel

Bob Mensel is a treasure of this here queer community.

The conductor and artistic director of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus (for 10 years now!) has taken a group that mainly performed show tunes to one that consistently delivers high-quality themed productions that not only offer beautiful music but inexplicably elicit an impassioned response from the entire audience. Lots of people cry at PGMC concerts—even hardened, cynical dykes like me.

How does he do it?

"There is an old Aristotelian—was it Aristotle or Plato?—I think it's Aristotle," Mensel begins, clearly in a bid to show off his intellectual capacities, "that talked about catharsis. I believe people need to work their emotions—they need to laugh, they need to cry. Art and music are the places where people can exercise their emotions in a healthy way."

And it doesn't hurt that the shows are also often tributes to queer lives. In fact, they all are under the surface, but some are particularly distinguishable: *Millennium Mosaic* in 2000 honored young people with some original arrangements by Portland queer youth. Last year's *Vintage Voices* celebrated older members of the Portland-area gay and lesbian community through music, dance and documentary films clips.

Composers and choreographers are sometimes brought in, but Mensel designs and directs all the productions. "A lot of it from the early days was simply arrangements of Broadway show tunes, but now we've developed a whole body of newly composed music, which is really wonderful."

It's also a heck of a lot of work, and sitting through one of these events can be a little emotionally overwhelming. "Our mission is to create eclectic concerts that honor the gay and lesbian community," Mensel says, "and uplift all people."

Besides that, who wouldn't like a job where you get to boss around gay men with a wave of your hand? Mensel always comes off so cool and suave brandishing his little stick, commencing and halting movement with looks and

nods. "I am a control queen," he readily admits. But "the reality is, it's all in the rehearsal. They generally ignore me."

Soon Mensel may be offered the job of a lifetime. He's in consideration for the new conductor of the Portland Symphonic Choir, the official chorus of the Oregon Symphony. It performs with the symphony and also has its own season.

Out of 30-something applicants, the choir narrowed it down to three hopefuls—two music professors and Mensel. "Symphonic choral music is probably more my specialty philosophically than any other music," he says. "My personal career goal has always been to conduct the chorus of a major orchestra."

Part of the final selection process for all three candidates is to conduct public concerts with the choir. This might be nerve-wracking for them, but it's fun for the rest of us to get to see Mensel in front of a very different bunch of musicians. (Although, frankly, he tells me that he isn't nervous at all and that nervous isn't really a word he would use to describe himself. Nervousness, he says, translates in him as "sort of ornery.")

He'll be conducting the symphonic choir March 8 and 9 at Reed College's Kaul Auditorium in a program called *Treasures from the Old World*, which includes Anton Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor*, Gioacchino Rossini's *Preghiera* and an old Welsh slumber song. (Get tickets from www.psgchoir.org.)

Being used to this particular space, where many of PGMC's concerts are held, Mensel was allowed to "change it quite a bit to make it work for the concert hall."

Although this choir is just a wee bit more classical than PGMC, they gave Mensel leeway. "In the gay men's chorus, you can be eclectic and fun, and the symphonic has been receptive" to some changes from its original program. "It's a little more light-hearted on the second half. I think it's a marvelous mix of music that really will appeal to a lot of people."

Don't worry, Mensel will still head up PGMC if he gets this job. Which may not be good news for the guys in the chorus, as Mensel sternly warns, "I'll be a real control queen."

As for the next PGMC concert, *Classical Voices*, that's Feb. 23 at the Old Church. (Get tickets from www.pdxgmc.org.) Because it's a performance of the chorus' auxiliary groups, Mensel will not be conducting. "I'm going to be an usher!" he enthusiastically states. "My role is to not boss anybody around...but I'm not sure that will happen." ☐

Portland Gay Men's Chorus conductor Bob Mensel may soon be bossing around a bunch more people



For God's sake, don't miss *The Producers* through March 2 at Keller Auditorium

The Producers is totally, totally gay

If you're an uninformed buffoon and haven't seen the 1968 movie *The Producers* like the Arts and Culture Editor of this newspaper, then what a delightful surprise it will be to you to sit down at the Broadway version of the Mel Brooks classic running through March 2 at Keller Auditorium. I know, you thought all Broadway musicals were gay, but none so gay, my friends, as this.

The Producers is about a Broadway producer and his accountant, who cook up a scheme to raise a lot of money for a new show, make a flop and keep the investments for themselves—because if a show opens and closes in one night, no one expects their investment back. So all they have to do is go out of their way to make the worst production ever seen (a tall order, when you think about it).

They finally decide on a script—*Springtime for Hitler*—and hire a terrible director and the worst of actors. Hilarity, of course, ensues.

What the ads don't tell you is that half the cast plays gay—and not just normal, average, Joe-on-the-street gay, but screaming, flaming, faggot gay.

The director of *Springtime for Hitler* is a drag queen with an unforgettable limp-wristed partner perfectly executed by Michael Paternostro. The scene inside their lush lavender living room, complete with dramatic and huffy exits, many introductions to their "theater assistants" and lines like "How do you really think I look in this dress?" is one of the funniest I've seen on stage in years. Kevin Cook (aka Poison Waters) was sitting in the row in front of me, and he almost fell out of his chair.

You will, too. For gosh sakes, go. Tickets are \$31-\$71 from the Portland Opera box office or Ticketmaster.

Skervy needs new home

Don't look for Skervy: Queer to the Bone! at Billy Ray's anymore. The smokin' dance night has outgrown the MLK Jr. Blvd. dive.

"There was a concern that the tiles on the first-floor ceiling might come loose and fall with all the butt-bumpin' good times happening on the second floor," DJ Zanne confides. Anyone who's been can testify to that possibility.

The Skervy crew is looking for a new butt-bumpin' location. If you have any ideas, e-mail zanne@dejanvier.org.

Watch Cockettes with Dave and Tom

The award-winning film *The Cockettes* returns to Cinema 21 for a free showing at 5 p.m. Feb. 23.

Recently named Best Documentary by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the film follows the 1970s theatrical troupe of hippie women and drag queens who decked themselves out in flamboyant costumes and gaudy glitter for a series of legendary midnight musicals. The *Cockettes* combined political parody, drugs, gender-bending sexuality and the kind of chaotic free-love fun that San Francisco was known for.

Filmmaker David Weissman, who is visiting Portland for a month, will attend the showing. The 48-year-old filmmaker is a friend of Pink Martini lead Thomas Lauderdale, who arranged the screening "to pull out the Oregon welcome wagon and show David what a creative, welcoming city Portland is." Well, now that shouldn't be too hard for us.

A reception will follow the screening at Le Happy, 1011 N.W. 16th Ave.

—Floyd Sklaver

Baby dyke biographies

The Women's Entertainment network plans to air four episodes of its *When I Was a Girl* series in March—one showcasing Melissa Etheridge and one showcasing Ellen DeGeneres. *Sex and the City*'s Kristin Davis is the host of the series, which is produced by journalist Linda Ellerbee.

Each show, which will include backgrounds of several women, documents growing up from childhood through awkward adolescence. Hopefully Melissa and Ellen will talk about facing fears around their sexualities and hopefully those comments will make it into the final edit.

The project "reaffirms that women appreciate sharing stories and establishing common bonds," says Ellerbee, "no matter where you live or what you do."

The Melissa episode is slated for March 3 and

Ellen for March 10. Women's Entertainment is available in the Portland area on digital cable Channel 502 and on satellite distributor DIRECTV's Channel 260. Yeah, pretty obscure, but clip this handy article and in six months check the video store. ☐

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