

PEOPLE

Funny Gay Male seeks audience

Bob Smith looks forward to another visit to normal ol' Portland

BY KATHY BELGE

Bob Smith loves his lesbians. Which is a good thing because he often shares a bill with them. He'll be performing, for instance, with comedian Karen Williams at Just Out's 20th Anniversary Party on Nov. 23 at Hollywood Theatre, and he couldn't be happier about it.

Smith likes to make people laugh, by golly, and he takes many opportunities to do so. He's had his own HBO special and wrote for *Mad TV*. He travels the country as a standup and is looking forward to his return to the Rose City.

"The people are great," he tells me from his home in Los Angeles. "They're intelligent, interesting, normal people."

Williams, who was featured in Portland's recent queer film festival documentary *Laughing Matters*, got her start in standup at age 30. After years of performing at women's festivals, colleges and comedy clubs, she went back to school and designed her own degree at Cleveland State University in humor and healing.

While making fun of tofu-eating, Birkenstock-wearing lesbians, Williams is a strong proponent of the healing power of laughter. After receiving her master's degree in education, the entrepreneur founded the International Institute of Humor and Healing Arts (or HaHA Institute) in Cleveland. She now splits her time between comedy tours and leading workshops like "Humor & Stress in the Workplace" and "Humor & Diversity" for businesses and other groups.

Both Williams and Smith are writers. Williams has been a script, ghost and speech writer. Smith is the author of two books of essays, *Openly Bob* and *Way to Go, Smith!* He's now working on his first novel, which will be set in Alaska. Smith was sent to

the 49th state to write an article for *Out* magazine when he got the idea for the book.

"It's a 'what if' novel," he explains. "What if you fell in love with someone from Alaska and moved up there?"

Smith is also pitching a comedy series with his friend and fellow comedian Elvira Kurt to Showtime and HBO. "We have a treatment for it, and we know what we want to do," he says. "Hopefully they'll love the idea." If they get the go-ahead, Smith and Kurt will write and star in the series.

Smith still occasionally writes for *Out*; his latest piece is for the magazine's "Hall of Shame" in which he writes about the worst homophobes of the year. The normally nice Smith likes this assignment because "I get to be mean," he says. "I like to be mean against people who deserve it." The president and pope both make the list.

Smith got his start in standup as part of the Funny Gay Males in the early 1990s with Jaffe Cohen and Danny McWilliams, whom he met up with this summer in Provincetown, Mass., for a Funny Gay Males reunion. He said he was amazed at how many more straight couples came to the show than before.

"The interesting part was that a big part of our audience were not put off by a show called Funny Gay Males," he comments. He credits shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* for widening the audience for queer humor.

"I do the same material no matter what my audience. I might change the order a little, probably move the more family stuff up front," Smith notes about performing for a more straight audience. (Which makes you wonder what the heck he might open with at his Portland gig.)

Smith is single, he says, but "willing to move to Portland for the right man." He has a love/hate relationship with Hollywood.

"I love my house," he says. "I decided that L.A. is a city of really nice private spaces and generally not-so-nice public spaces. People's homes are really wonderful and beautiful, but then there's the strip malls...."

But for people watching, it can't be beat. "For a writer or creative person," he laughs, "there's always something to observe." □

BOB SMITH will perform along with Karen Williams and Pink Martini during the Just Out 20th Anniversary Party 7 p.m. Nov. 23 at Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd. The show will be preceded by a 5:30 p.m. reception featuring cake, artist offerings and organizational tables. Tickets are \$20 (cheap!) from Gai-Pied, It's My Pleasure, Touchstone Coffee House or www.justout.com.



Bob Smith joins Karen Williams for a night of queer comedy during the Just Out 20th Anniversary Party on Nov. 23

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