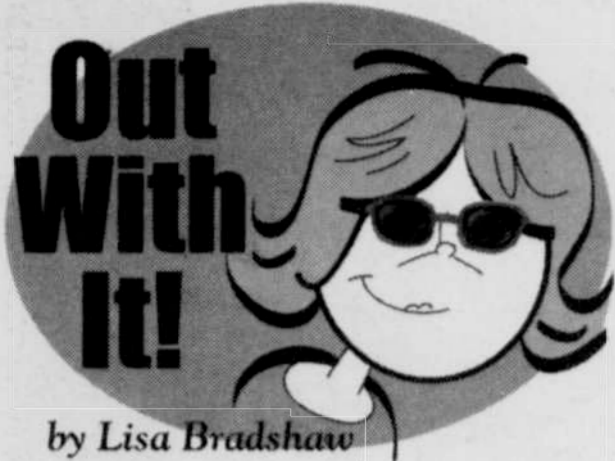


DIVERSIONS



by Lisa Bradshaw

Living on the down low

Maurice Townes and Kevin F. Allen, owners of Atlanta-based Senwot Nella Films, are worried about black queer men and the women who love them. Specifically, they're worried about the down low.

No! Not *down below*, the *down low*: a term African American men coined for those who act straight but play gay—on the side. Men on the down low frequently live double lives—girlfriends and wives in the “real” world, sex with men in the secret one.

Although being secretly gay or bi certainly cuts across ethnic lines, African Americans and other people of color particularly struggle with the down low and the STDs that result. Sociologically, this is based on the same reasons black men often find it more difficult than white men to come out in general: You're already a black man in a white man's world, you don't want to be a homo, too. And many of these men have a fundamentalist religious background.

So Townes and Allen made themselves a little DVD series they call *The Closet*. Although not available for screening at press time, the bits I've seen have hooked me already. It's essentially a queer African American soap opera.

“I think it's a great tool to validate those men...who are living their lives on the down low and who are not out and who are seeing women—or married to women—and having sex with men,” says Stephan Herrera, HIV program manager of Portland's Brother to Brother, a support and advocacy organization for African American gay and bi men. “When I think of men on the down low, what comes to mind first is that most of those guys who have sex with men and go back and have sex with their wives aren't using protection...so they're putting their wives at risk for STDs and HIV.”

Which Townes says precisely. “African American women are dying in staggering numbers from being infected with HIV,” the director rails. “Men who are sleeping with women have to hide the fact they're sleeping with men.”

Townes says he made the series for straight women as much as for men on the down low. “You do not have to live your life hiding behind a woman or using our sisters as trophies.”

But here's the problem. (You knew I'd find one, did you?) *The Closet* is available only through subscription at a whopping \$24.99 per two-episode DVD. Or you can order the whole first season for \$260 (at www.thecloset.tv).

One wonders if Senwot Nella Films approached PBS or a distribution company about putting out DVDs to rent. “In terms of the viewer audience, it's going to appeal mostly to black, gay men,” says Herrera, “rather than to men who are leading a double life.”

Men on the down low and the wives who don't know about it are not going to order DVDs to be mailed to their homes. If Townes and Allen really want to reach their intended audience as they say, they'd better make a few phone calls to a few cable channels. **J**



Dance diva Amber plays the C.C. Slaughters Block Party on Aug. 14

Amber to play C.C. Slaughters Block Party

Dance hit starlet Amber will play the third annual C.C. Slaughters Block Party Aug. 14.

You might remember her from such hits as “This Is Your Night,” “Above the Clouds,” “Sexual (Li Da Di),” “Yes” and “If You Could Read My Mind” (a cover of the Gordon Lightfoot classic from the movie *54* that Amber, Ultra Naté and Jocelyn Enriquez really shouldn't have touched).

Amber's fourth full-length album, *My Kind of World*, will be released in October, and the sappy, happy blonde is a nice little cherry on top of the best block party you'll find this summer.

The event starts at 6 p.m. on Northwest Davis Street between Second and Third avenues. Amber plays at 10 p.m., and a host of other entertainment is included. Cover is \$10.



Much to his partner's consternation, Isaiah is on the down low in *The Closet*



Marne Lucas' *Full Metal Window* is part amusement park, part head injury

Art is a drag (a garden, a war)

Queer feminist art is alive and well in Portland this month. Take a trip on the magical mystery tour with me, won't you?

Our first stop (left to right on your helpful city map) is the **Standard Arts Window** at 1715 N.W. Lovejoy St. A 24-hour view of the evolving window exhibition shows us bi Portland artist **Marne Lucas'** *Full Metal Window* through Aug. 15. Lucas is well-known around town for her erotic photography under the name Gina Velour and until recently curated art for the gay-owned Aalto Lounge.

Her latest deceptively simple display is made up of two large self-portraits printed onto plexi-mirrors and mounted in baroque-ish gold carved frames.

“They are inspired by the colors and textures found in amusement parks,” says Lucas, “specifically the Gravitron.” She also cites a heavy metal and hip-hop ambiance.

The name of the display and the decisively camouflaged “Beyatch Blanket Bling-go” piece, though, give away other intentions. Like, “WHAT IS THIS FUCKING WAR DOING TO OUR BRAINS!” Or possibly “LET'S USE OUR BRAINS TO GET OUT OF THIS FUCKING WAR!” But that's snooty art criticism, so whatever.

Next on our peregrination is the visual and sound installation **Vertical Garden** by newlyweds **Hilary Pfeifer** and **Heather Perkins**, on display in the lobby of the Portland Building at 1120 S.W. Fifth Ave.

This beautiful exhibit has a creepy undertone of the “outdoors” of the future. “We can't take it for granted anymore that nature is all around us,” the couple note in their artist statement. “Will we come to a day when the majority of the population relies solely on past memory, photographs or television to describe their relationship with nature?” Whoa, very *Soylent Green*.

Pfeifer has oft displayed her little

wooden, painted forms, but they've never seemed so at home as in this remarkable floral-wall landscape. Perkins, who has an extensive background in music, theater and video sound work, provides little noises you might hear if you were in a real garden (playing on headphones).

Off we go, then, outdoors (scanning for greenspace) across the (polluted!) Willamette River to **Newspace** at 1632 S.E. 10th Ave., where we find the ultra-cool *Art Is a Drag* exhibit by Chicago photographer **Christa Holka**.

A member of the Chicago Kings drag troupe, Holka has shot several of her fellow kings in traditionally “feminine” and “masculine” attire. “I was inspired by comments,” she

says, “from people who feel very strongly that a girl should ‘dress like a girl.’ But what if that ‘girl’ likes to dress like a ‘boy?’”

So she juxtaposes images of the same friend differently dressed. “I want the viewer to look at the girl in ‘girl’ clothing and feel the girl's discomfort and then feel uncomfortable themselves.”

Holka will be in attendance at the **Aug. 6** opening, which includes a film screening of *The Undergrad*, a smarmy little take on *The Graduate* by Michele Mahoney, also a Chicago king.

And that's your early August art, people. Be careful out there.

Sex lives of Portland actors—revealed!

Stark Raving Theatre continues its more daring late-night fare this month with **Thrust**, a new show conceived and directed by Portlander Michelle Seaton. The one-act is a series of scenes, monologues and movement pieces all dealing with sexuality in its many varied forms.

“It's very unapologetically honest,” says Stark Raving's gay artistic director, **Matthew Zrebski**, who wrote some of the show and arranged the music and choreography. “There's some very, very honest dialogue about what people *really* go through in the bedroom.”

In a unique twist to average theater, cast members, including Portland gay actors **Michael Tufel** and **Todd Pozycycki**, penned most of the script themselves. “They're all a bit autobiographical,” Zrebski says of the separate scenes. “Everyone in the cast has written pieces...people dug into their own closets, dealt with their own demons.”

Thrust includes scenes of straight and gay sexuality as well as all those pesky shades of gray in between and plays at 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Aug. 13. Tickets are \$12 from 503-232-7072.

Donate to Bob Hackney fund

Portland Gay Men's Chorus softball team member Bob Hackney, who was hit by a fly ball during a July 11 game, may need surgery, says **Rose City Softball Association** assistant commissioner Sean Canavan.

“Along with the 18 stitches to close the wound, Bob may need to have metal plates put in his head to ensure that the bones heal correctly,” shares Canavan.

Unfortunately, Hackney is uninsured, so the team has set up an account for him at U.S. Bank. Contact any branch to donate to the **Bob Hackney Medical Fund**.

“None of us would want to be in his position,” notes Canavan, “and if we were, we'd appreciate all the help we could get!” **J**

Compiled by LISA BRADSHAW



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Portland Gay Men's Chorus softball team member Bob Hackney may need surgery