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Heaven help us

Fallen Angels regroup just in the Saint Nick of time

BY PAT YOUNG

They're back—back on the streets where they belong to make some noise and have fun. That's how Judith Rizzio refers to the regrouping of the Fallen Angels Choir after an eight-year hiatus.

And they're back just in time. The Fallen Angels are exactly what we need to help us through this post-election holiday season: four women dressed in Dickens-like outfits performing political theater and satire on the streets of Portland.

It was the election and President Bush's "political capital" comment that motivated Rizzio to call her buddies, dig out her old costume and create some new Dubya-inspired lyrics. Here's a sample from "Pardon Me, George," sung to the tune of Glenn Miller's "Chattanooga Choo Choo":

Start reading our lips, you know you're sinking our ships

*You're still at Pennsylvania Avenue on Nov. 4
The Bible Belt belted out, "Let's have four more"*

The rich are getting richer, we need a relief pitcher.

In another moment of strange synchronicity, the renewal notice for the Fallen Angels trademark arrived in Rizzio's mailbox Nov. 3. It was a definite sign that she needed to get things going again.

The group started in 1976 with men and women before becoming an all-women act. Rizzio was there from the beginning. She remembers heading to their first appearance at

By the time the women took a break in 1996, they were playing in some pretty fancy venues, drawing crowds of several hundreds and performing in Seattle and Newport.

But times have changed, Rizzio notes as she calls around town trying to find places for them to perform. There's an air of conservatism that she has ever felt before.

"Right now, people are so bristly and careful not to offend," she says. "And it is scary. It's as if being liberal is being anti-patriotic. You aren't bad people, but you really aren't the type of entertainment we want here. But we regrouped because we felt so strongly that we needed to immediately respond without silence."

Rizzio is committed to keeping political theater alive. To bring in young women. To teach them about the form and how to have a voice and to not fear going out there and using it.

The outspoken bisexual sees her politics as being more complex now. She found turning 50 to be quite liberating.

"I'm feeling more radical than I did 10 years ago. And I am going to be more. It's wonderful. I don't care if they think I'm a crazy old lady. It's fabulous," she laughs.

Cathryn Cushing was with the choir for six years during the early 1990s. She had performed in various venues for most of her life, but becoming a Fallen Angel was her first experience with comedy and political theater. She didn't have a political motive when she joined the group, but she soon found the message to be exciting.

Today, politics is absolutely the reason she agreed to join again. Absolutely, she repeats.

Rizzio and Cushing both have children. The kids grew up watching their mothers take a stand to make a difference. Years later, one of Rizzio's sons laughingly told her that she had ruined his favorite Christmas songs.

Back in the day, when the group was performing before hundreds of people, "It was a family business," remembers Cushing. "Everybody was working. My mom, our spouses, our children."

"I think all of our kids mourned the passing of the Angels. They're excited we're doing it again."

Cushing is looking forward to the choir's first performance at a fund-raiser for the Oregon affiliate of the National Abortion Rights Action League. Turns out that her daughter, Meredith, who is a member of The Gypsy Moths, is also performing at the event. "So, my daughter's band is opening for us!" she says proudly. **■**

The FALLEN ANGELS CHOIR will perform during the "Evening of Cultural Activism" hosted by Just Out News Editor Sarah Dougher from 5:30 to 9 p.m. Dec. 6 at Dante's, 1 S.W. Third Ave. Tickets are \$15 from 503-223-4510, ext. 18, or www.prochoiceregion.org.

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.



From left, Kate Finn, Judith Rizzio, Sharon Knorr and Cathryn Cushing put political twists on holiday songs

Portland Saturday Market on a cold morning when they decided to stop inside Meier and Frank to get warm. One of the clerks thought they looked ever-so-cute in their outfits and was delighted when they offered to sing.

Well, she was delighted until she heard the lyrics to "We Wish You a Merry Business": "Now Christ was a profit, that's perfectly clear. 'Cause his birth brings in profits that grow every year." The Fallen Angels were quietly escorted out of the building.

They were escorted out of many places, including the Galleria. Rizzio remembers seeing Bill Naito laughing after they performed.

"He loved us, but his merchants didn't," she says. He waved to them as they left. "It always was something that, even if people didn't like us, they laughed," she adds. "We were funny. And there was always a bit of truth in everything we said, even if you didn't like the politics."