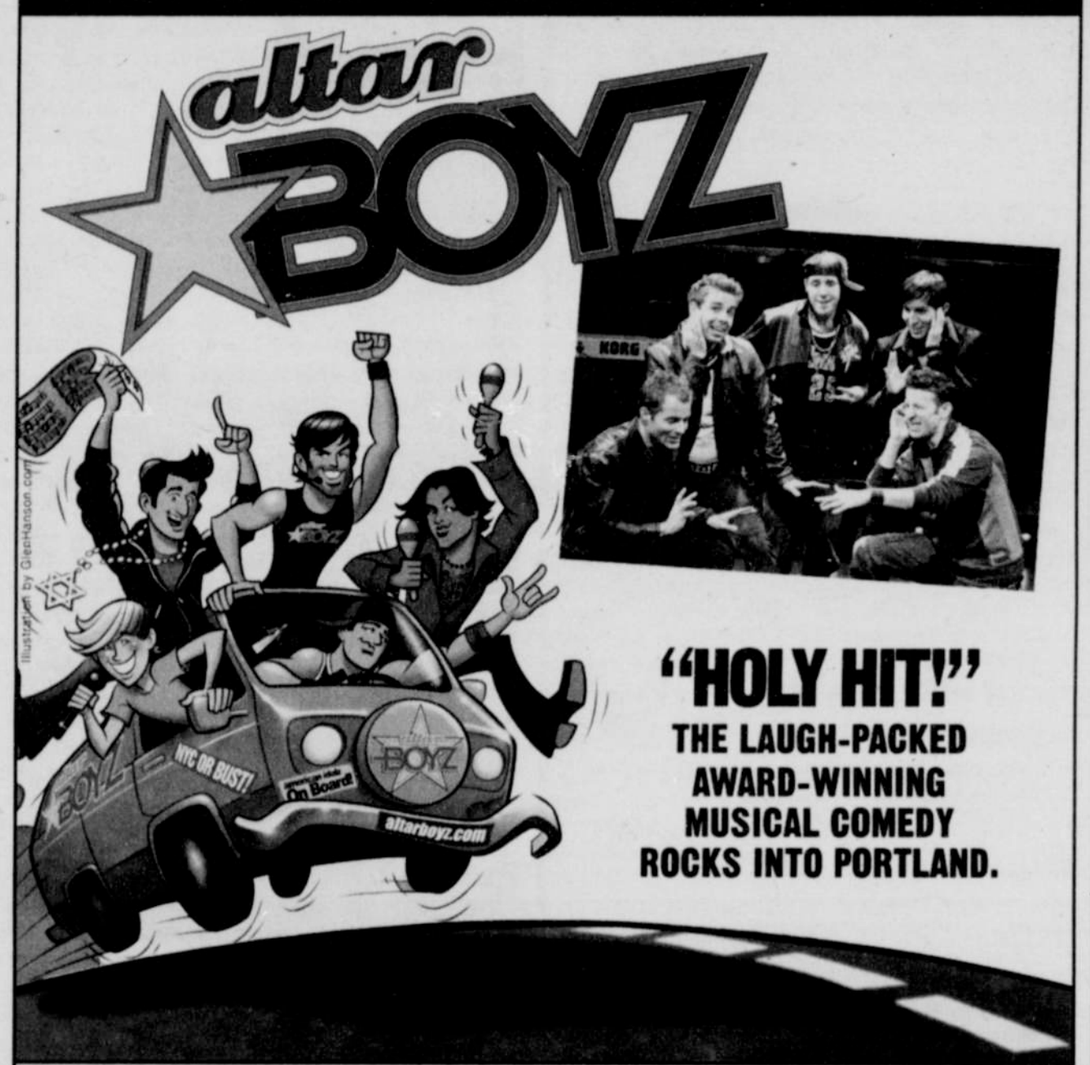
WINNER!
BEST OFF-BROADWAY MUSICAL
2005 OUTER CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD
WINNER!
FAVORITE LONG-RUNNING OFF-BROADWAY SHOW
2006 BROADWAY.COM AUDIENCE AWARD



"HOLY HIT!"
THE LAUGH-PACKED AWARD-WINNING MUSICAL COMEDY ROCKS INTO PORTLAND.

Fred Meyer BROADWAY ACROSS AMERICA PORTLAND
JAN 30-FEB 4 • NEWMARK THEATRE
503-790-ARTS • BroadwayAcrossAmerica.com • 503-241-1802
ticketmaster M-F/9-5
Groups 10+ 503-321-5251
Tickets subject to agency convenience charges.
nwa K103 The Hilton Family be hospitable katu

THE SILVER SCREEN CLUB
...is a gift that plays all year round.
A Silver Screen Club subscription entitles reduced or free admission for the Portland International Film Festival & more!
PORTLAND ART MUSEUM NWFilmCenter
www.nwfilm.org
503-221-1156
The 30th Portland International Film Festival Feb 9-25

books

Hand-Whistling and Community

Longtime lesbian activist reflects on her rich life

by Patricia L. MacAodha

On a Saturday night during the annual Irish Weekend in Heppner, a group of family and musical friends sat in John Dougherty's kitchen listening to Sally Cohn hand-whistle a well-known classical tune. When she finished, Dougherty, deeply moved by the performance, remarked, "Guess we don't need to go to church tomorrow."

That's the way Cohn's hand-whistling often strikes people, whether it's a small gathering of friends or an audience of more than 1,000 at one of the many whistling competitions she's entered. Portland's sexual minorities community, however, also knows Cohn as a longtime and active member of the local scene.

During her childhood in Morrow County, Cohn watched boys cup their hands and whistle to make noise at sports events. She discovered she could make music using the same technique.

She recalls a bucolic childhood, a life that was "fine until my mid-teens. Then I got bored. My peers were all dating boys, but the boys avoided me." Desiring acceptance, she tried to date boys but wasn't really interested. Frequent teasing by classmates created more problems.

MARTY DAVIS

Sally Cohn hopes the Lesbian Community Project will remain to serve Portlanders.

Cohn's primary teen rebellion was smoking, and she hung out with girls who also smoked, which led to problems because "Mom didn't approve of my school friends."

During this time, she began getting crushes on girls. Continually unhappy, she convinced her parents to send her to a Portland school. They chose a private school, St. Helen's Hall (now Oregon Episcopal Schools). The social atmosphere wasn't ideal, but Cohn found a few friends and enjoyed the academic atmosphere. Ongoing crushes on girls led her to come out to herself, but these feelings conflicted with her religious beliefs. She graduated in 1952 and attended Lewis & Clark College for two years before transferring to University of Oregon.

Although history was her greatest interest, she decided to major in education. (Her mother had been a teacher.) She was still closeted, still struggling with beliefs and reality. She returned to Portland in 1958, discovering the queer bar scene. In 1962, a desire to leave everything familiar led her to the East Coast. She lived in Massachusetts for a year, then moved to New York, where she resided until 1972.

Cohn's first long-term relationship, with a woman who was also closeted, began in New York. There were a few opportunities for community, including writing for *The Ladder* under an assumed name.

Cohn's mother died in 1964. Unable to attend the funeral, she felt trapped between community and family. As her father's health declined and New York became "the city that didn't work" for her, she decided to take her recently earned master's degree and return to Oregon. The couple moved to Portland in 1972 and rented a house. Getting Oregon teaching credentials proved almost impossible, so Cohn found clerical work with a drug and alcohol agency. She kept that job until retirement 25 years later.

Cohn discovered an active and growing queer community and became unwilling to continue the closeted life. The relationship ended, and in 1975 she bought a house that she still owns. Cohn got involved with her community: entering talent shows and attending Portland Community Church (forerunner of Metropolitan Community Church of Portland) as well as rap groups at the Women's Place Resource Center. Once isolated, she finally discovered the community she'd been seeking.

In 1988, going half-time at work, she began to volunteer more with the Lesbian Community Project. She became volunteer coordinator for Donna Red Wing, then for Laverne Lewis. Cohn eventually joined the LCP board. These days she's still part of LCP and hopes it will remain to serve Portland's lesbians. She also volunteers with Start Making a Reader Today and helps out in the office at Nativity School. In addition to continuing to hand-whistle, she sings in the choir at St. Andrew Catholic Church, where she is a member.

Buoyed by publishing efforts by housemates, and realizing she had a good story, Cohn decided to write an autobiography, *A Hand-Whistler: Memories of Creativity and Activism*, reflecting the roads she has traveled and how projects and hobbies have often moved her forward. At 72, her life just gets more interesting, with more things to enjoy in her widening community. jo

SALLY COHN *reads selections from* A Hand-Whistler: Memories of Creativity and Activism *6:30 p.m. Jan. 18 at In Other Words, 8 N.E. Killingsworth St.*

PATRICIA L. MACAODHA *is a Portland freelance writer. E-mail her at patmac31@juno.com.*