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Love Is in the Air

Cruising for community in PDX

I'm in the mood for love.
So are the other 30 or so guys tonight at Oregon Theatre.
Huh? Hold up...what year is this? I simply didn't think big-screen porn movie houses still existed, much less were patronized, in the 21st century. But I suppose if they'd be thriving anywhere, it would be here in Portland, as we defend our unofficial title of Primo Dirty Porno Triple X City USA.

Valentine's Day is right around the corner, after all, so a trip through Portland's most notorious adult bookstores and movie theaters seemed necessary for finding the pulse of modern gay male *l'amour* in the city. Sure, Craigslist, Manhunt and Adam4Adam (there's more, much more) are the standard stops for online cruising, but I laid aside my laptop to hit the old-school haunts.

First stop: Oregon Theatre, Southeast 35th and Division. I wait for the traffic to clear (Who would see me? What sort of judgment would be passed?) and dart inside. There's a handsome-ish man, short with a full head of close-cropped gray hair, taking admission (6 bucks) and checking

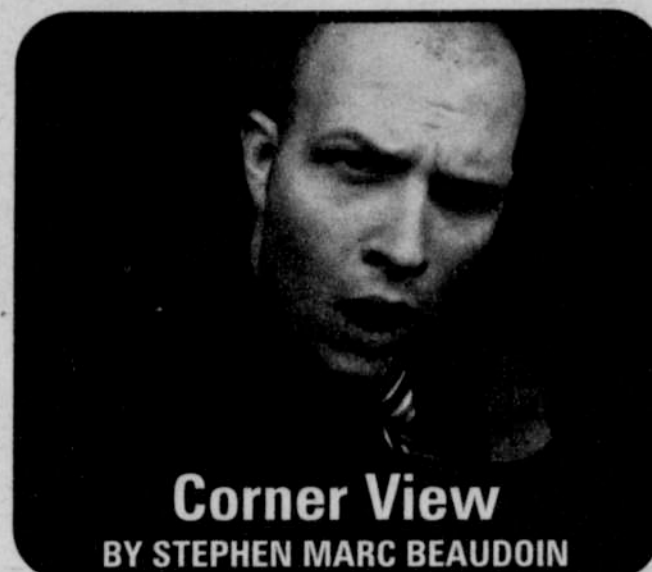
Conversation after conversation, I hear the same poignant needs from queer men here: We want fellowship, we want shared experience, we want community.

IDs. He looks about as excitable as a library assistant. There's a wall of X-rated DVDs (*Anal Destruction*, *Major League Bitches*), a fully stocked snack bar (Snickers, 75 cents) and a creatively defaced bathroom upstairs. One of the entries in black magic marker dates from Jan. 3, 2008, and reads, "Looking for a good looking guy 25-40 YO STD free with pencil prick."

Opening the heavy wood doors to the theater is like slipping into a black hole, and I suppose that's part of the idea and the appeal. Rickety sofas and stuffed recliners extend the length of the theater; there's peeling paint on the ceiling and walls. The lights are low enough to provide just the brand of mystery appropriate to such encounters—and to cast faces and bodies in the type of half-light that hides wrinkles and rolls. It should be noted that Oregon Theatre is—to speak generally—not for the beautiful people.

That didn't seem to matter to Dave, a 27-year-old graphic designer I met at the theater. Lean and handsome with the type of scruffy messenger boy look that's almost de rigueur for Portland gays—knit cap, two-day unshaven face, baggy zip-up hoody hanging loose over a fitted graphic tee—Dave sidles up, sniffs me out. He smells like sweat. "I haven't been here in a few weeks," he says. "Most of the guys here are a little scary." So why come back? "I'm horny," he says. And then, almost unknowingly: "I'm lonely."

There are other lonely creatures lurking in the theater. A man in probably his late 40s with an athletic build stalks the aisles with a small pile of clothes in his arms. He's fully naked, except for a pair



Corner View

BY STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN

of sparkling white sneakers. He sets the clothes down on a couch and meticulously selects a pair of athletic shorts to doff. He prowls the room again, sets down the clothes, repeats the process. This continues for at least an hour, before I leave.

Another stop on the circuit is Fantasy, a video rental and hookup spot with several squeaky-clean shops in town. The one on West Burnside seems to favor white-collar types shuttling through downtown. The Northeast Sandy Boulevard shop is more egalitarian, with a heaping of middle-class gays-about-town. Skulking through the black-light hallways of the store's "preview booths"—eyes and shirt lint glowing with an eerie fierceness—I spot a server from a downtown gay restaurant here, a barista from NoPo over there. Conversation is nil, so you learn to read a lot from a cock of the head or the way a guy breathes when he cruises past you.

I stop to talk with the waiter. He's older and partnered. He says he comes to Fantasy for escape, for release. But also, very simply, to be around other men.

Why bring all this up?

People often talk about the lack of community in Portland gay life. Young gays, especially, berate bar culture—I do it myself—but find themselves unable to escape it. Conversation after conversation, I hear the same poignant needs from queer men here: We want fellowship, we want shared experience, we want community.

While lingering at Fantasy, at Oregon Theatre—and at additional places like Fat Cobra or Mr. Peeps—I was struck by the real sameness of all these desires. Young or old, gay, bi or unclassifiable, Stark Street or Killingsworth, we're craving this sense of coming together. Social outlets and cliques become increasingly fragmented: the hyper-masculine NoPo bears vs. the gentler Faerie bears; the inner Southeast hip young queers and their wealthier, downtown-bar-hopping gay brothers (whom they scorn). Pretty soon there will be nowhere left more comfortable, and where we can unassailably be ourselves, than plopped down on the sofa in our living room, alone in the flickering light of the TV. I know many gay men who spend their Saturday nights doing just this.

Before leaving Oregon Theatre, I watched a truly memorable encounter. A heavyset white man and another chubby man of mixed race enjoyed each other's company in the back row. After each had climaxed, they let out heavy sighs. And then one man extended his hand. "I'm Chuck," he said, and smiled. "I'm Tom," the other replied, and took his hand. And then they embraced. 10

STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN writes about Portland arts and queer culture at fromeverycorner.blogspot.com. He welcomes feedback at stephenmarcb@yahoo.com.