

show he answers simply: "It'll make you laugh and make you cry."

Just Call Me Darcelle chronicles Darcelle's life in 10 non-chronological parts, including his birth in 1930 during the Depression—"when the high point was a night out in Portland, which was like going to Mecca!—to eat Chinese pork noodles;" how he got his stage name; his relationships with his wife, Roxy and his kids, his escapades traveling cross country; growing up the only child of a sawmill worker; and the death of his mother when he wasn't yet 10-years-old.

"That was... difficult," he says. "Losing a mother when you're so young."

Born Walter Cole, Darcelle grew up in Linnton, Oregon and has lived in Linnton and Portland his entire life. His family was poor. He got one pair of shoes a year, so by summertime, "the soles were flapping." Such poverty shaped his drive to be successful in business.

Darcelle XV Showplace was not Darcelle's first business. He'd owned Café Espresso, which had the first espresso machine north of San Francisco, an after-hours, booze-free jazz club, and an ice cream parlor before, in 1967, he bought an old bar in Northwest Portland.

"It was skid row back then and no gay man would cross over the Burnside Bridge to come here. They told me that! It wasn't posh enough in those days. So I hired a lesbian to run the place and we became mostly a lesbian bar, a tavern. Two or three of us would perform a couple of nights a week, but we had no plan. Everything just happened as it did!

"A woman named Susan Stanley wrote an article for the *Willamette Week* back in the 1970s," he continues. "She called us the 'Best Kept Secret' and before you know it people were coming to see us! All the gay men traveled over the Burnside Bridge now, even bringing their families to the show.

"Soon we were performing four or five nights a week. We had to change the tavern around to fit the show and eventually we were a club and not a tavern. We got our liquor license, so we built on a kitchen. And now we serve dinner and do a show with showgirls [in drag], male dancers, and me!"

Darcelle didn't grow up with dreams of dresses. One night, when he was 37, he put on a dress for a performance and the crowd loved it.

"And I thought, 'Here we go!'"

The dress stayed.

"I don't dress in drag outside the club, unless I'm



Vintage Darcelle (above), whose love of the stage is evident, and in recent times, meeting and greeting a few of his cadre of fans.

PHOTOS COURTESY DARCELLE

performing or doing something for charity. I'm not a drag queen, that's a different thing. I prefer to be called a drag entertainer," he explains, his gold and diamond 'Darcelle' bracelet glittering.

It's striking to listen to Darcelle's gravelly voice coming out of Walter's body, the combination. His ostentatious bracelet with the old, red t-shirt and tan shorts. His shaped eyebrows with his close-cropped, white hair. The idea that when you do something you love for so long, your job becomes a part of your everyday life.

"It's all about being happy! My life is just what I

want it to be—no regrets. None," he waves his hand. "Happiness is the most important thing. As I say in my show, if you don't like the one you're with, leave 'em; if you don't like your job, leave it. Be happy."

And for those of you interested in astrology, yes, *Darcelle is a Scorpio.*

In his 30s, Darcelle met Roc Neuhardt, aka Roxy LeRoy.

"He and I were dating before we started performing together," Darcelle says. "Roxy had come to us from the Hoyt Hotel on Glisan and Broadway. He was a dancer, famous for doing roller skating in drag standing on his head. No wonder he had to get his hip replaced!"

DARCELLE ON WRITING HIS ONE-MAN SHOW:

"It was a sweet and sour experience. Dredging up the past is definitely a sweet and sour experience. But without my past I wouldn't be who I am—the comic, the performer."

Roxy joined the Showplace in 1975 and has been its choreographer ever since. He also consulted on Darcelle's one-man show.

"He's the only one I trust to give me advice on it, aside from Sharon, of course."


Sharon Knorr worked with Darcelle before, directing a one-man show about the infamous Divine. She also wrote, produced, directed and performed her one-woman show, *Why Can't I Marry the Cute Beatle*, last year. She is not only directing Darcelle again in *Just Call Me Darcelle*, she co-authored it with him. But they based much of the script, Darcelle is quick to note, on an email sent to him by his friend Barbara Dunn.

"Barbara wrote to me and said that if I ever wanted to write a book, I must do the following—and gave me a list. So then I called Sharon and said, 'Here's our outline!' After that, Sharon and I met for an hour every Monday night until we finished it."

When asked if the writing process was a difficult one, he admits to mixed emotions: "Dredging up the past is definitely a sweet and sour experience. But without my past I wouldn't be who I am—the comic, the performer."

Just Call Me Darcelle opens at Darcelle XV Showplace September 27-28, and then continues a month-long run there in November. He doesn't perform the show in drag, though it is obviously a major focus.

With a storied life to share, Darcelle has no expectations for his latest effort. "Let's see where it goes!" he says. "Just be happy. It's being happy that has kept me so young. Just be happy and come see the show!"



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