

TORONTO'S PREMIER GAY LIFESTYLE DIGITAL MAGAZINE

MGT

We Know Gay

MY GAY TORONTO

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Ekaterina Zakharova



MGT DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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PLUS MUCH MORE!

VIZIN makes us feel

DREW ROWSOME



There are a thousand queens who can lip-synch the hell out of a disco anthem but it takes nerve, skill and style to sing one live. VIZIN not only glamorized herself by going from 703 pounds to Barbie and being a fashion contributor to Us Weekly, but can also send notes soaring into the stratosphere without any pitchiness or shrieking. Add in her First Nations heritage and over-the-top sense of style, and VIZIN is a pop music package ready to explode.

She is also, sadly, skilled in the art of being circumspect and diplomatic. She ignored or dodged questions that would have allowed her to indulge in the time-honoured art of drag queen bitchiness or smutty sex jokes. Her story is a remarkable one and VIZIN appears to have more class than her idol.

Drew Rowsome: Your single “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” spent eight weeks on the Billboard Dance Club Songs chart, peaked at #24 and charted over Taylor Swift. How does that feel?

VIZIN: I’ve been lucky to work with an incredible team including Chris Rosa (RuPaul) who produced the song and DJ Hector Fonseca who remixed the song. Hector has had over 20 number one hits on the Billboard charts for artists including Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Sia. The whole experience is a reminder that dreams really do come true. It feels Mighty Real!

The press release states that you had a five-octave range “like Mariah Carey” until puberty “Darn it.” What is your range now? And when you have such a beautiful tone, why would you want to shriek like Mariah?

VIZIN: I still have about three octaves. Mariah was actually my first influence in singing. I used to annoy my mother by singing along to all of Mariah’s songs and especially my favorite, “Emotions,” where she showcases her insane range.

What sort of regimen do you follow to preserve your voice and keep it flexible?

VIZIN: I still do warm-ups that I learned in high school. I sound crazy doing them, but they help. I also do a lot of singing in the shower because the heat helps the muscles while the steam clears out the gunk. Also, lots of water and honey.





Five hundred pounds is a significant weight loss to go through. How did you take the weight off and how long did it take?

VIZIN: *I had gastric-bypass surgery in 2009 which lead to me losing around 200 pounds. Since then, I've lost the rest through diet and exercise. I'm still losing weight and I'm working with a plastic surgeon and trainer to take my body to the next level.*

Have you considered writing a weight loss self-help book filled with glamorous photos?

VIZIN: *A self-help book would be a fun project, for sure. I love to cook in my down time and I would love to work on a cookbook.*

How has your self-image changed since the weight loss? Are you more confident when on stage or do you resent conforming to a body image?

VIZIN: *My self-image hasn't changed much. However, I'm happy with the improvement that the weight loss has done for me and my relationship with heels.*



Why pick a Sylvester cover?

VIZIN: *It started with my first cover of "I Was Born This Way" by The Reverend Carl Bean. It was a disco song from the '70s that my producer Chris Rosa as well as my manager Leo Madrid and I decided to record as a way to connect the past with the present. We then went on with the Sylvester song, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" which was really fun because he was the ultimate disco diva.*

When will we get to hear the music you are writing? What styles and thematic material are you exploring? Will you do an album or a series of singles?

VIZIN: *Right now, it's a singles market, but it's fun to write and record new music. I'm discovering my sound and having a good time doing it.*

Do you think that being a drag queen is an advantage in the music business? How has that changed in the years since Sylvester and Jobriath? Or even since RuPaul first crossed over?

VIZIN: *Even though the times are changing, I don't think that being a drag queen is really an advantage. Otherwise, everyone would be doing it. However, it's definitely more accepted to be a drag queen these days.*



Bianca Del Rio has been quite scathing about drag queens recording music (but then that is her shtick). Is there a danger of oversaturation, of becoming a novelty or niche act, instead of being judged musically by the same standards as the mainstream?

VIZIN: There's always that danger of oversaturation, but I think that's where it will be easy to step away from drag. I don't see myself doing drag forever, but I can't see myself not doing it. It's an interesting dichotomy.

Canada's experience with our indigenous population is considerably different than that of the United States. It is a painful process that we are all still struggling with. How did/does your heritage support you besides the gift of your name? Do you identify with the tradition of two-spirited? Will it become a musical influence?

VIZIN: Coming from the Arikara tribe on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, I've always drawn strength from my indigenous heritage. In my culture, the two-spirit is held in high regard and viewed as a third gender. I've never experienced much discrimination in my tribe.

Who would you like to collaborate with?

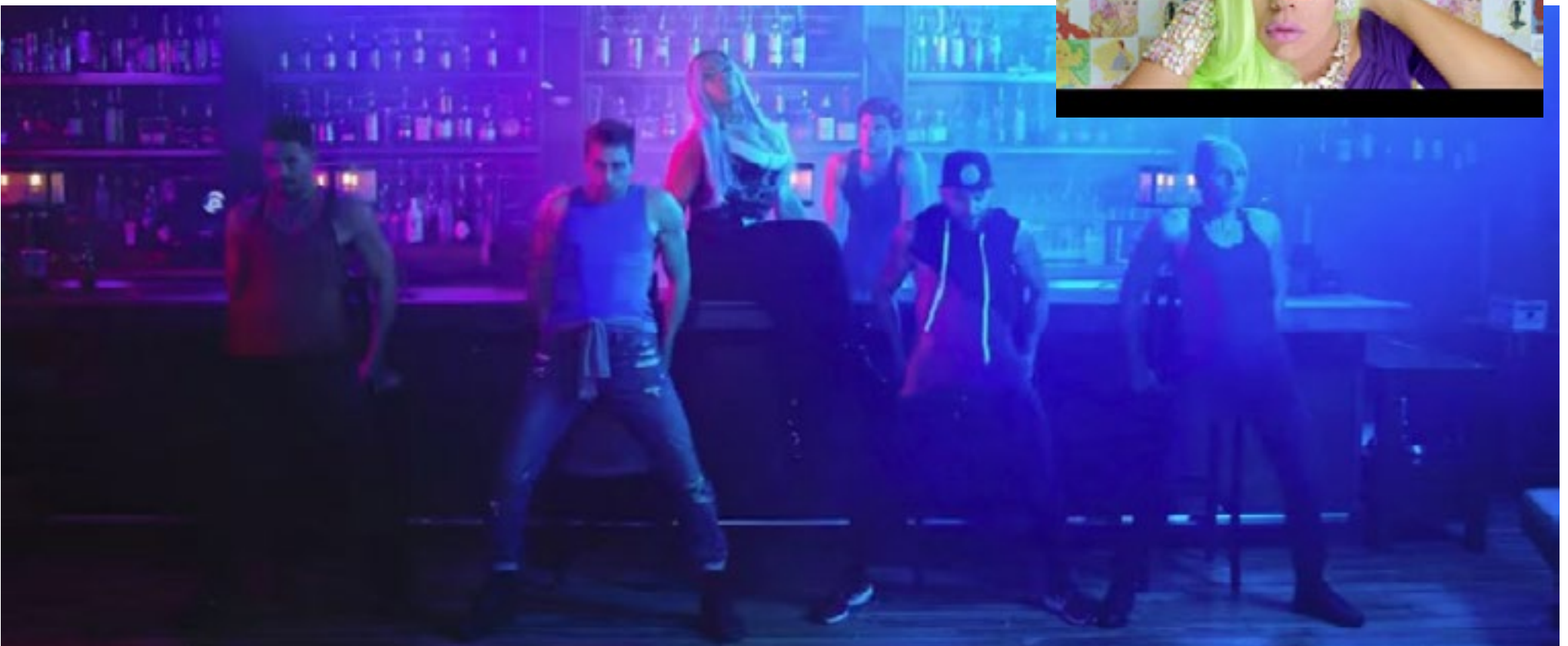
VIZIN: I want to collaborate with anyone who wants to make good music and have a good time. My ultimate collaboration would be with Mariah Carey, of course. She is my idol and I would die if it ever happened.

You notoriously turned down an opportunity to compete on RuPaul's Drag Race, a launching pad for drag careers and even music careers like Adore Delano's. Is Drag Race a boon to the community or a curse to drag queens?

VIZIN: It's certainly changed the perception of drag queens and opened the eyes of the world.

What music do you listen to when you are alone? What is your guilty pleasure (musically, unless you'd like to go there)?

VIZIN: I love listening to jazz and old-school rhythm and blues. My favorites are Nina Simone, Etta James and Billie Holiday. I also love listening to opera and recordings of Maria Callas.



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EMINGTONSTM



PAUL BELLINI & DREW ROWSOME



THE
CELLAR

The loss of another iconic institution

With the horrible suddenness that accompanies the news of any death, I was shocked to find out that The Cellar had closed.

Was there a more depraved place on earth? A black door. Steps leading down into a dark basement. All black walls. Corridors with tiny rooms, and rooms with glory holes. It was so dark you could be naked the whole time, although smart people wore footwear, if you know what I mean. That's because at The Cellar, you could jizz anywhere. Most popular was the long dark hallway at the back. When the place first opened in the mid-'90s, that hallway was packed. Imagine, two dozen naked gay men groping each other in complete darkness. The darkness was the point. You wouldn't want to see who was groping you. It could be someone you know, or more likely, a really ugly old man. Lots of guys I'd tell this to would be grossed out, but until you are swimming through flesh, you have no idea what complete sexual abandonment means.

It was gross, to be sure. One night, while sitting in the TV lounge, some idiot took a dump on the floor while standing up. I spent hours watching people narrowly avert stepping on that turd. Once, on New Year's Eve, the fire alarm went off and the lights went on. I couldn't help but notice that the walls had a nice even stain line from all the ejaculations that had hit them over the decades.

When it first opened, everyone went. That's where I met my first boyfriend. The novelty of a sex space - not a bathhouse, although it did have two very unused dry saunas - was new to stuck-up Toronto. It was always a great place to walk off a big drunk. It was fun during the day, too. In fact, when they came up with the idea of the Nooner, which meant discount lockers from noon to 1pm, the place was packed. It was always a bit disconcerting after a busy Nooner, when you're still reeling from whatever the hell just happened down there, and you open the door to the street and are overwhelmed by daylight and traffic noise.

I hadn't been by in years, having settled into a comfortable relationship. But sometimes I miss that spirit of depravity. Another thing I loved as a young gay man is gone, and there ain't nothing like it to replace it.

- Paul Bellini

After reading Paul Bellini's ode to The Cellar and its demise, I thought to myself that I hadn't been to a bathhouse in a long time and I pulled up the Central Spa website with the idle thought of having a steam and a romp. Central Spa is a chain of four bathhouses across Ontario with the Toronto one, as I discovered to my chagrin on my last attempted visit, having extremely curtailed hours: basically it was only open for nooners and after work quickies.

As the blurb on their website says, "A large percentage of our bathhouse clientele are married, bisexual or men who are questioning. Central Spa simply caters to men who have sex with men. No label? No problem!" An ad they used to run in fab magazine used that as a selling point with a photo of a wedding ring being slipped off a masculine hand. It played to the discretionary needs of some of the clientele, and the fantasies of sex with an ostensibly straight (and therefore butch) man of another demographic.

The website had a surprise. The list of locations had a notice beside the Toronto location's link:

CLOSED FOR BUSINESS
Thanks for a fun 20 years!

Clicking on the link earned a pop-up full of information:

Permanently Closed as of Jan 1, 2018



Apparently I wasn't the only one who hadn't visited in a long time. But it was sad and disheartening that somewhere where I had had a lot of fun had expired without my even knowing. I wasn't as shocked as I should have been, bathhouse culture has been in decline, hit by the triple whammy of HIV, hook-up apps and condo development. St Marc Spa, Club Toronto, Romans, Oak Leaf Steam Baths, The Barracks, and now The Cellar are all gone. But the memories live on. I learned a lot about myself and life, love and lust in those sex palaces, and they, particularly The Barracks, are missed.

The particular appeal of Central Spa has already been written about to near perfection by Todd Klinck in issue 341 of fab magazine in February of 2011. I cannot pretend to improve on his observations and still have hope that his book of collected "Trade" columns is published so that his literary flair in documenting gay sex in that time period is not lost. In "Roaming the Halls: Todd Klinck takes a new cruise through Toronto's bathhouse scene," Klinck writes,

Central Spa is an anomaly in the Toronto bathhouse scene. It's located way west in Little Portugal and it's not open 24/7. The small facility, located above a Portuguese sports bar, has 15 rooms, two porn rooms and a recently added maze area with glory holes and curtained doors. The showers were renovated a couple years ago and they are gorgeous. The steam room is functional and so is the dry sauna. When I visited at 7pm on a Sunday there were only a handful of guys in the place: one in his late 20s, a couple in their 30s, and a few guys above 40. I found one I liked, did my thing and, as I was leaving, I bumped into an incoming cruiser. "Anything in there?" he asked. Without hesitation, I said, "Yeah, about four or five." "Oh, so it's not worth going in."

Working at an event at Central Spa about a year ago, I came to adore its vibe. It's a genuine neighborhood bathhouse that receives a fair volume of traffic over the course of an entire day, even though there may be only five to 10 people at a given time. The design of the place is very conducive to relaxing and waiting. It has a living-room-like TV lounge (which plays regular TV) and a free Internet terminal. The clientele is very diverse in age, race and body type. If you want some booze (and you're brave enough), you can always go to the sports bar below to grab some shots while you are waiting.



My experiences were similar. The space was small but friendly and even at capacity it couldn't have contained more than a few dozen men. But, as Klinck notes, it only takes the right one. Or two. Or more. I personally met a beautiful Brazilian boy with limited English but limitless charm. One of Canada's foremost theatrical performers who proved to be just as worthy of an ovation when offstage and between the sheets. A much older man who proved to be spry and possessed of the stamina of a 16-year-old. A paunchy hirsute man with a seductive smile and a most extraordinary uncut cock that also seemed to smile. During post-coital cuddling, he confessed his undying love and wanted to meet again but it had to be two weeks hence as his wife was getting suspicious.



I met a handsome public relations flack who was obsessively concerned that his clients would learn about his penchant for rough sex. He often rented the room in the centre with the windows that could be left open for voyeurs or to entice more participants. There was a contractor who apologized for the paint flecks on his muscular hands though the rest of his physical charms rendered that minor flaw moot. A couple looking to spice up their relationship and uncertain if they were doing the right thing - they went on to host many dinner/sex parties that I was privileged to be invited to. Men across a varied spectrum: shy, exhibitionistic, seductive, arrogant, desperate, disdainful, flamboyant, flabby, muscular, macho, etc, etc, all reduced to their basic gay humanity, clad in a towel and driven by an, also varying, degree of horniness. Or curiosity.

And that's the great thing about a bathhouse and about Central Spa in particular. Sex is the great leveller in the gay community. Desire, in its purest most naked form, knows no race, age, social class or physical form. It all depends on that spark, that involuntary twitch of the cock, a clever remark or a flirtatious grin. Relative anonymity leads to more opportunities, an expansion of limits and preconceptions, a freedom to express the flesh rather than assumption. In its own small way Central Spa did that particularly well. It will be missed.



(shortly after this piece was posted it was discovered to be inaccurate. While it usually humiliating to have to post a correction, in this case it is good news: Central Spa has reopened as Splash, which can be read about here)

Splash: the resurrection of an iconic institution

Just a day ago we accidentally posted some fake news. Fortunately readers immediately alerted me to this - much thanks to Philip Cairns and Steve Laflamme who have their fingers and their . . . on the pulse of Toronto's gay sex scene - and I was able to quickly remedy it. Venerable bathhouse Central Spa did close on January 1, 2018, but it reopened on February 1, 2018 under new management and a new name: Splash.

I was unable to confirm anything beyond a twitter account - @splashtoronto - that contained minimal content beyond the re-opening announcement and hours. Having no intention of offering any more misinformation, I set out to the fringe of Parkdale, deep in the heart of Little Portugal, to investigate.

The signage still reads "Central Spa" but there is a new logo "Splash" slapped on the doorway to the staircase leading to the second floor pleasure palace, and a sign giving the hours. The neighbourhood is gentrifying rapidly, there are more shiny new buildings than ramshackle storefronts; there are more hipsters smoking in front of salons, galleries and coffee shops than the formerly ubiquitous old men in front of social clubs and watering holes.

I am five minutes before opening but the door to the street is unlocked and after climbing the stairs, I am buzzed in. The cashier is still counting the till but another man, clutching a cup of coffee, invites me to have a seat in the bright and cheerful lounge and they will be with me in a minute. He is very affable so I prepare to start asking questions. A compliment on the paint job that is new to me - I have already confessed that



I hadn't been there in a long time - elicits a shrug. The paint job was the previous owners' work. "We just did a lot of cleaning."

He then explains that the Central Spa chain was losing money at this location, even though it was the first and ostensibly the flagship. When they closed, the new owners managed to reach an agreement with the landlord and then had 10 days in which to open. It is still too soon to tell how business will be but he is happy to see the regulars returning. I, after explaining that the only information I could find was that they were closed, ask about advertising or a website. There is a website ready to go but there are problems with the hosting company. "Coming soon," he assures.

Advertising is a different question. During his explanation he uses the word "discreet" in every sentence. Sometimes twice. He is sounding out the customers because many of them are closeted or married. "We're a long way from the Gay Village out here," he says. He's not sure if advertising for more business is more important than maintaining the delicate balance. Though the heating/air conditioner on the roof is going to need some attention soon. Splash appears to be more a labour of love than a business.

The cashier is ready and he apologizes for the cash only policy. He offers an unsolicited explanation about the internet still being tied up with the previous owners. He is familiar and smiles when he is recognized, yes, he has worked here "Forever." They both tell me to "Have fun" and I head into the dim hallway.

Everything is the same as it was and is scrupulously clean so the previous review/memorial is still accurate. There are 17 rooms, lots of lockers, two dark rooms (one with a giant bed and porn, one with a jungle gym-like gloryhole structure), an open shower area, washrooms, and two steam rooms. And very quickly I am no longer the only customer.

The man at the front who was functioning as a greeter is everywhere. He helps a man on his first visit find the light switch in his room (it is very dark in the hallways when the rooms are empty) and fluffs the pillows in the orgy room. And personally greets everyone who arrives. The disco music switches on and the cruising begins.

Though, in the hour and a half spanning the lunch rush that I spent there, about a dozen men came and came and went. They skewed younger than I expected and the mood was very relaxed but with a tasty sexual undertone throbbing beneath. And despite the smorgasbord having less choices than the larger competitors, the quality is just fine. And as Todd Klinck noted, "It only takes one." There is beautiful manboy with a huge toothy smile and a floppy uncut cock who is lathering in the shower while his eyes glisten with excitement and invitation . . .

**Splash is at
1610 Dundas St W
and is open daily
from 11am to 9pm.**



WOLFPACK



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MARCH 23RD 2018

10PM TO 3AM

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NEILL MACLEOD
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BLACK EAGLE

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\$10 BEFORE 11PM \ \$15 AFTER

My Gay Toronto.com

FIXTHATLID.com

Gucci at Milan Fashion Week 2018: a fabulous wtf

DREW ROWSOME



Please do not consider my disinterest in fashion as a slur against the art form. It has more to do with my inability to understand and study (and co-ordinate a coherent style) than any disdain or disrespect. I, for the most part, just do not have the tools at hand to write about fashion. I remember attending a runway show by the extraordinary Greta Constantine. Set in the basement of a massive auto dealership, it was an experience I will never forget but that I was incredibly grateful that I didn't have to try to analyze or write about.

I do, of course, have a few small areas of presumptive fashion expertise: men's underwear (Raw Studio, Andrew Christian/C-IN2, Hantei Kamen), the rock n roll nexus, philanthropy (Fashion Cares), fashion photography (Mikey Sin), old-style Hollywood glamour (Orry-Kelly, Edith Head), drag (Dickie Beau, Fay Slift, Katinka Kature, Brooke Lynn Hytes, Nick Adams), leather (Marty Rotman, MLT), random bitchy comments (pick a blogpost at random) and in context of a review of another medium (Versace, Edith Head). Eager to exercise underused fashionista muscles, I was overjoyed when fashion house Gucci unleashed their "Gucci and Beyond" Fall/Winter collection advertising. This canny spellbinding mashup of camp, science fiction, kaiju, horror, and outrageous but beautiful outfits, was haute couture for my soul.



So when the new Gucci collection debuted at Milan Fashion Week 2018 and was instantly dubbed “wtf,” I had to peruse. It is indeed, on first look, utterly wtf. But that is its charm. And also where I found a way into talking about fashion. Discussion of a work of art involves its emotional effect, thematic concerns, and construction. The Gucci collection offers plenty to dissect, discuss and diss.

Much of the collection appears to have been inspired by Game of Thrones. Some outfits are recreations, some pulled elements, and there are baby dragons and other reptiles. The models carrying replicas of their own severed heads may also be a reference to the copious violence that Game of Thrones is prone to. Or the severed heads may be a reference to the creepy medical bed/operating room set up in the middle of the runway. Or the operating room motif may reference the distinct serial killer vibe of two of the male models and their outfits, exploring the disturbing sex appeal of Michael C Hall in Dexter and Darren Criss in The Assassination of Gianni Versace.



From there the references explode in many directions: Frida Kahlo unibrows, bejewelled burqas, direct cultural appropriation of Indigenous religious wear, terrorist ski masks, post-modern modernist sunglasses, burlesque and chakras. There is a very witty bit of play with contrasting the Gucci logo with the one for the New York Yankees: making sport of fashion? It is dizzying and not at all coherent in a way that I can summarize. Until the pantsuit strung with glittery strands atop a pair of platform shoes capped by a model in a Ziggy Stardust haircut. This I understand. David Bowie synthesized anything and everything to his own ends, creating beauty out of chaos and obscure allusions or outright brazen theft.

I have read variations of the quote “Good artists copy, great artists steal” attributed to Picasso, Dali and Fellini: all artists who created visually overwhelming and breathtakingly original work. Reading any of the wonderful loopy interviews by Isaac Mizrahi where he discusses how he divines the inspiration for his collections, suggest that fashion may operate in the same way. Certainly Gucci designer Alessandro Michele is gleefully following his muse through any and all influences that catch his eye. Is it great fashion? I have no idea, I still don’t feel qualified. But I do feel qualified to label the show itself provocative art of the most intriguing kind.

I should ask, one queen to another, new besties HRH Elizabeth and Anna Wintour what they think. Lizzie made a big splash at London’s Fashion Week and she certainly knows a lot about games of thrones.



Let the GAY GAMES begin!

RAYMOND HELKIO



Held every four years since 1982, the Gay Games brings people together from all over the world under an umbrella of diversity, respect, equality, solidarity and sharing. The Gay Games is a global multi-sport and culture event open to all, young or old, athlete or artist, experienced or novice, gay or straight. The difference from the Olympics is that you do not need to be an elite athlete to compete, and in most sports you don't need to qualify, however in some cases there are entry requirements such as events that double as a world championship. Athletes compete in age brackets of five to ten years, depending on the sport and the attendance. In teams, the competitive age category is usually based on the age of the youngest member of the team. There are some exceptions to this rule, rowing is determined by the average age of the crew and athletics relay events are determined by the combined ages of team members. Some sports are structured to include a variety of competition formats, which range from competitive to social to recreational. If you're looking for a reason to scratch that French itch, this might be your *raison d'être*.

Registration is open for this summer's games which will be happening in Paris, France. The Games are eight days long starting with an opening ceremony and ending with a closing ceremony plus a three-day conference at City Hall. For more information or to register:

2018 Gay Games: Saturday August 4-12, 2018



I'm Like Peter Pan: I Still Believe

SKY GILBERT



John Ibbitson in the Globe and Mail is trying to be nice when he says “Bars have closed, and bathhouses . . .” He goes on to say that Church Street is nevertheless still important because it’s a place to “have a coffee, read a book” among sympathetic friends.

Right.

It’s all very comforting to imagine that all gay men, lesbians and trans folk are ‘making love’ with their lifetime committed married ‘partners’ - or even with someone they met on a ‘dating app’ - in the wall-to-wall-carpeted privacy of their middle-class homes.

Well I, for one, am not comforted.

For though it’s true that bars and bathhouses on Church Street have closed, it’s not true the present day purpose of Church Street is only to provide a place for people to have a coffee with friends.

What about Spa Xcess? What about Steamworks (an international chain of bathhouses that still flourishes all over North America and in Toronto?)

Woody’s and the Eagle pack ‘em in like sardines on weekends. What about the kids lining up to get into Crews and Woody’s with their bisexual friends? And what about toilets in the business district downtown?

And dark rooms? And what about all the orgies, crystal meth parties and condom-less sex that goes on in rented and private spaces?

So why this lie that we don’t need Church Street, except for ‘coffee’?

Well, it’s become politically correct to suggest that gay men are not having sex anymore outside of committed relationships. It’s so retro to think of gay men as sexual outlaws. And gay men love to promote this lie because we like to think of ourselves as respectable, like those nice straight people.

The fact of the matter is that even in the Toronto tolerance bubble kids still go through agonies coming out to their schools and their parents.

And no queer couple is going to get away with necking in straight bars on Richmond Street.

And if you step just slightly out of the bubble - to Northern Ontario, never mind Utah or Iran - you stand a good chance of being beaten or killed for being openly queer.

It doesn’t help to lie about the realities of gay life. The realities of gay life are not going away soon.

Though many wish for homophobia to disappear, wishing doesn’t make it so.

Like Peter Pan, I still believe in fairies.

And if you’re honest with yourself, so do you.

LGBT Programming

RAYMOND HELKIO

MYSEUM:INTERSECTIONS ARRIVALS + DEPARTURES

The third annual Myseum Intersections festival explores intersectional perspectives of Toronto through collaborative exhibitions, events, workshops, and tours. This year's theme, "Arrivals & Departures," explores Toronto's many communities, cultures, and characters, and highlights how different perspectives converge to create multiple visions of our city's past, present and future.

Queer highlights include:

[Jeanne B '93: A Gendertroublemaker Arrives](#)

Gender oppression, sex work and animal welfare intersect in surprising and affecting ways in this exhibition focused on transsexual artist/activist Mirha-Soleil Ross. From the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), DIY LOVE, The 519.

[Now and Then](#)

Now and Then is a video art commissioning and presentation project developed by the RT Collective in collaboration with the CLGA and the Gladstone Hotel. A team of ten artists will create new video pieces in response to specific items they find in the archives.

[Escondidos No More!](#)

This exhibit traces the history of the coming out of the Latinx LGBTQ community in Toronto. The exhibit features photos, posters and other cultural artifacts that represent the events, activities, organizations and people who spearheaded these movements. From Escondidos No More!, The 519, CLGA, Grupo Gay Latino HOLA, Latinos Positivos Toronto.

[The Journey, Not the Arrival, Matters](#)

Just when did Toronto turn queer? Did it just happen at one historical moment or is there a story there or, better yet, stories? Using Oscar Wilde's visit to Toronto in 1882 as a starting point, this storytelling event provides multidimensional points of view and gazes on Toronto's queer histories. From Jeffrey Canton Productions, CLGA, Dora Keogh Irish Pub, Spadina Museum, University College, University of Toronto.

**Myseum Intersections:
Arrivals & Departures
March 6 – 31, 2018**
[Schedule](#)



Image: "Escondidos No More!", traces the history of the coming out of the Latinx LGBTQ community in Toronto. The exhibit features photos, posters and other cultural artifacts that represent the events, activities, organizations and people who spearheaded these movements.

MGT COVER PHOTOGRAPHER, AN ASTONISHING PHOTOGRAPHER WORKING UNDER INTENSE PRESSURE

EKATERINA ZAKHAROVA

DREW ROWSOME



The photographs of Ekaterina Zakharova are a powerful sensual exploration of the male form and its relation to other men, sexuality, gender and the world. They are also not as well known or readily available as such extraordinarily individual works of art should be. That is partially because of the intense eroticism and NSFW nudity. But it is also for reasons that Zakharova explained long after MyGayToronto.com and MGT had become enamoured and aroused by her work, and requested an interview to bring her art to the attention of our readers. Zakharova is far braver, sexually philosophical, and more fearless than even that heartstopping first viewing of her intense work reveals.

Drew Rowsome: How did you become interested in photography? And why did you choose it as your art form of expression?

Ekaterina Zakharova: I always admired beauty - not necessarily in terms of well known and accepted standards but rather the beauty of an object. A person is an object of a beauty when I look through a camera, just as much as any natural event. When I was a kid, I spent hours looking at the bark of a tree, sand in a clock or skin texture. Everything is a combination of opposites - right doesn't exist without wrong; chaos is impossible without an order - everything is connected and therefore everything has a right to exist. This is the magic of photography - that one can catch the moment of a connection and keep it for eternity. I can't draw so photography became my only form of expression and, in many cases, the only way to communicate.



Ekaterina Zakharova

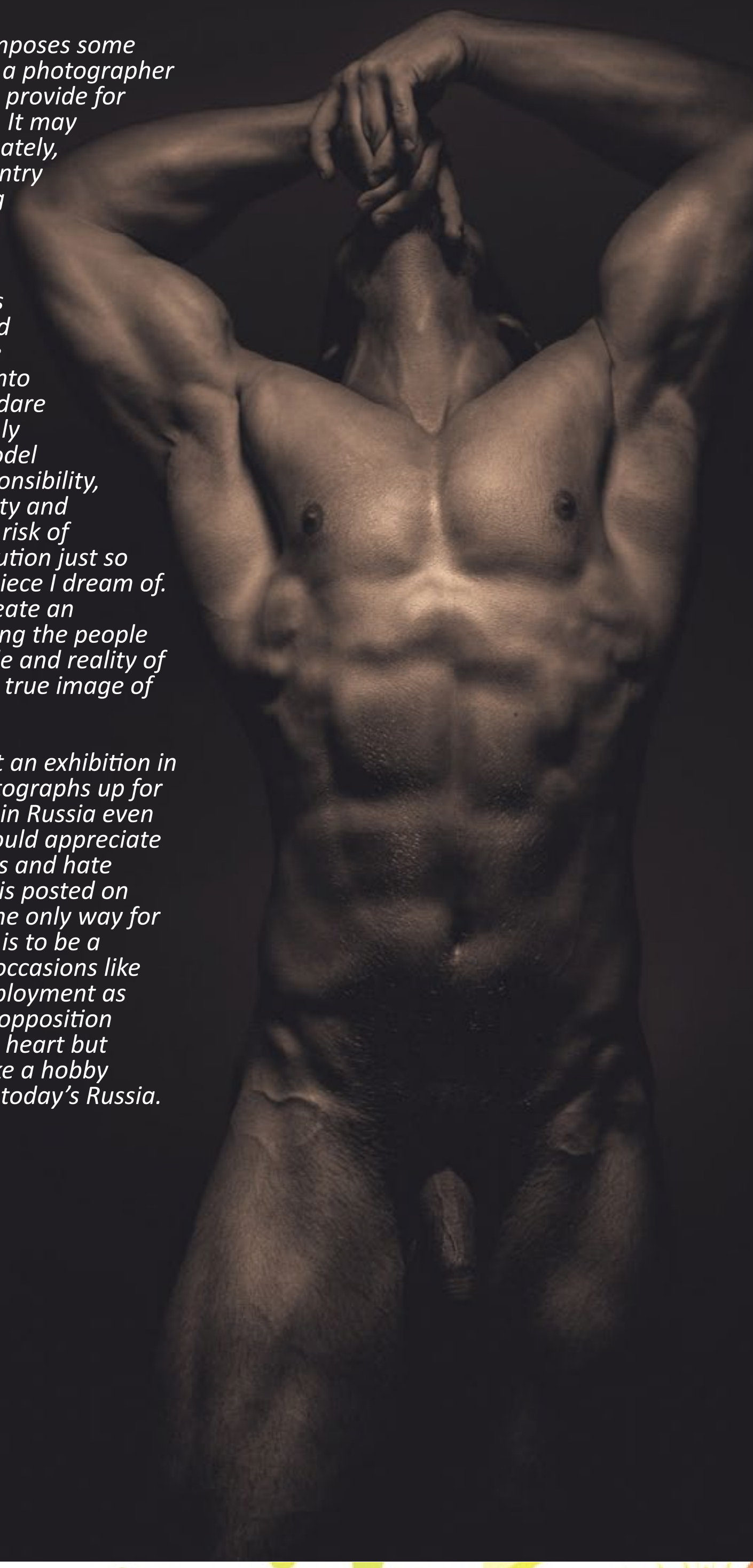


Ekaterina Zakharova

There is an astonishing breadth to your work from wedding photos to BDSM erotic. Are you following your muse? Do you do commercial work as well as your own artistic pursuits?

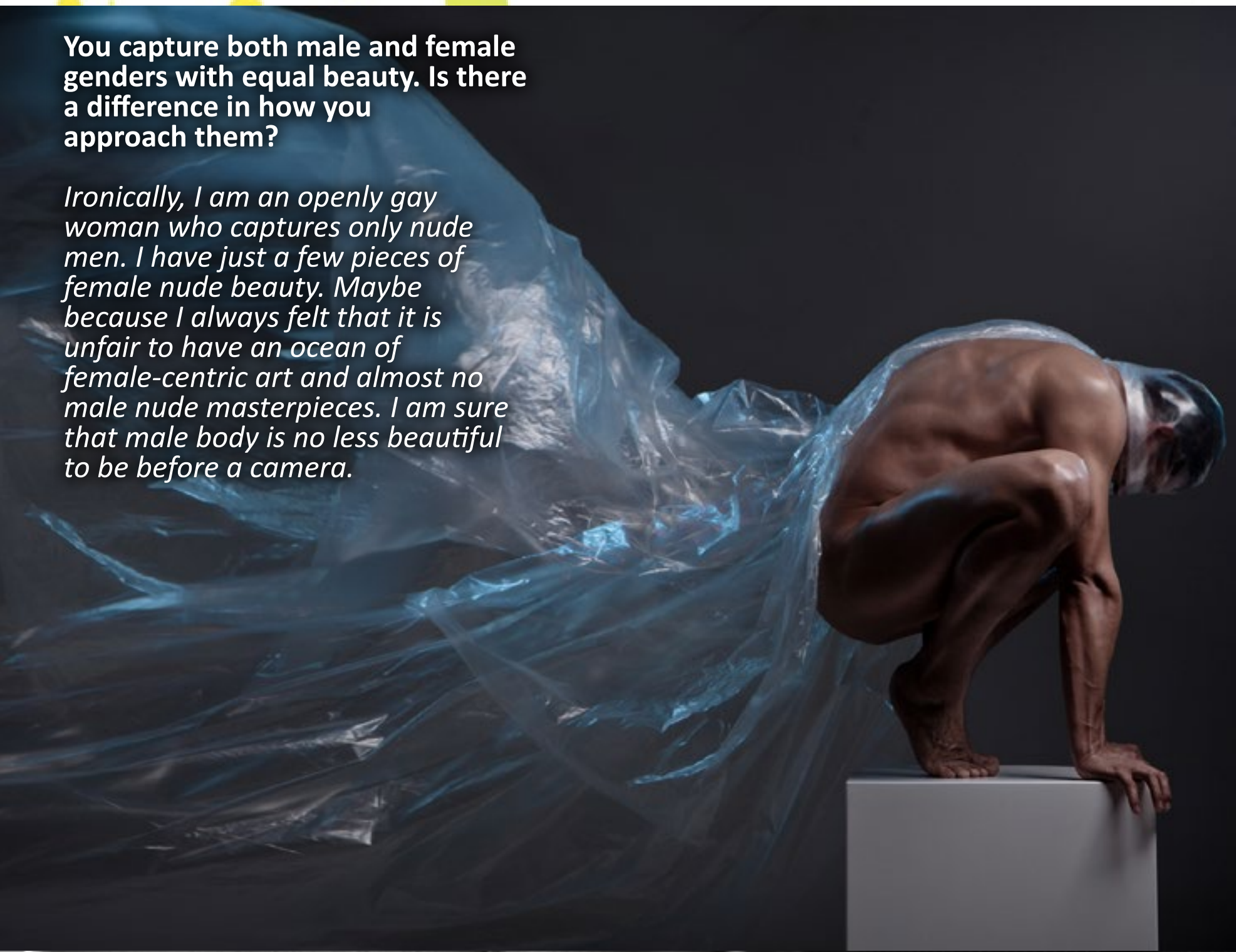
The reality of living in Russia imposes some limits on what I can express as a photographer and even more limits for me to provide for myself while doing what I love. It may seem unpatriotic but, unfortunately, this is the reality. I love my country and I believe the most amazing people live in this part of the world. However, the recently introduced and enforced anti-homosexuality regulations trapped my creativity and killed the freedom to truly create the art I envision before stepping into a studio. I am not scared nor I dare to call myself brave, but the only thing I know for sure: every model invited to the studio is my responsibility, their security is my responsibility and I can't ask them to take on the risk of harassment or possible prosecution just so that I can create a truly deep piece I dream of. Thus, I am doing my best to create an alternative art without disclosing the people behind it. The emotion, struggle and reality of every photograph is still a very true image of my vision.

I also can't take the risk to host an exhibition in Russia or trying to put my photographs up for sale due to the political reality in Russia even though, I believe that many would appreciate my work. I do get death threats and hate letters after every photograph is posted on social media. And that's why the only way for me to survive and pay the bills is to be a commercial photographer for occasions like weddings and my full time employment as motion designer with the only opposition channel in Russia. It breaks my heart but photography becomes more like a hobby holding my passion hostage in today's Russia.



You capture both male and female genders with equal beauty. Is there a difference in how you approach them?

Ironically, I am an openly gay woman who captures only nude men. I have just a few pieces of female nude beauty. Maybe because I always felt that it is unfair to have an ocean of female-centric art and almost no male nude masterpieces. I am sure that male body is no less beautiful to be before a camera.



Ekaterina Zakharova



Your models are of many varied body types and personalities. Does their look inspire a photograph or do you search out a model that fits your vision? What do you look for in a model?

All my ideas change at the moment I see a model. Every one of them is unique and presented to me during the shoot in a new light I might not have imagined before. Models open their souls in front of a camera changing the concept of every piece and definitely making it much more real to those looking at it later.



Ekaterina Zakharova



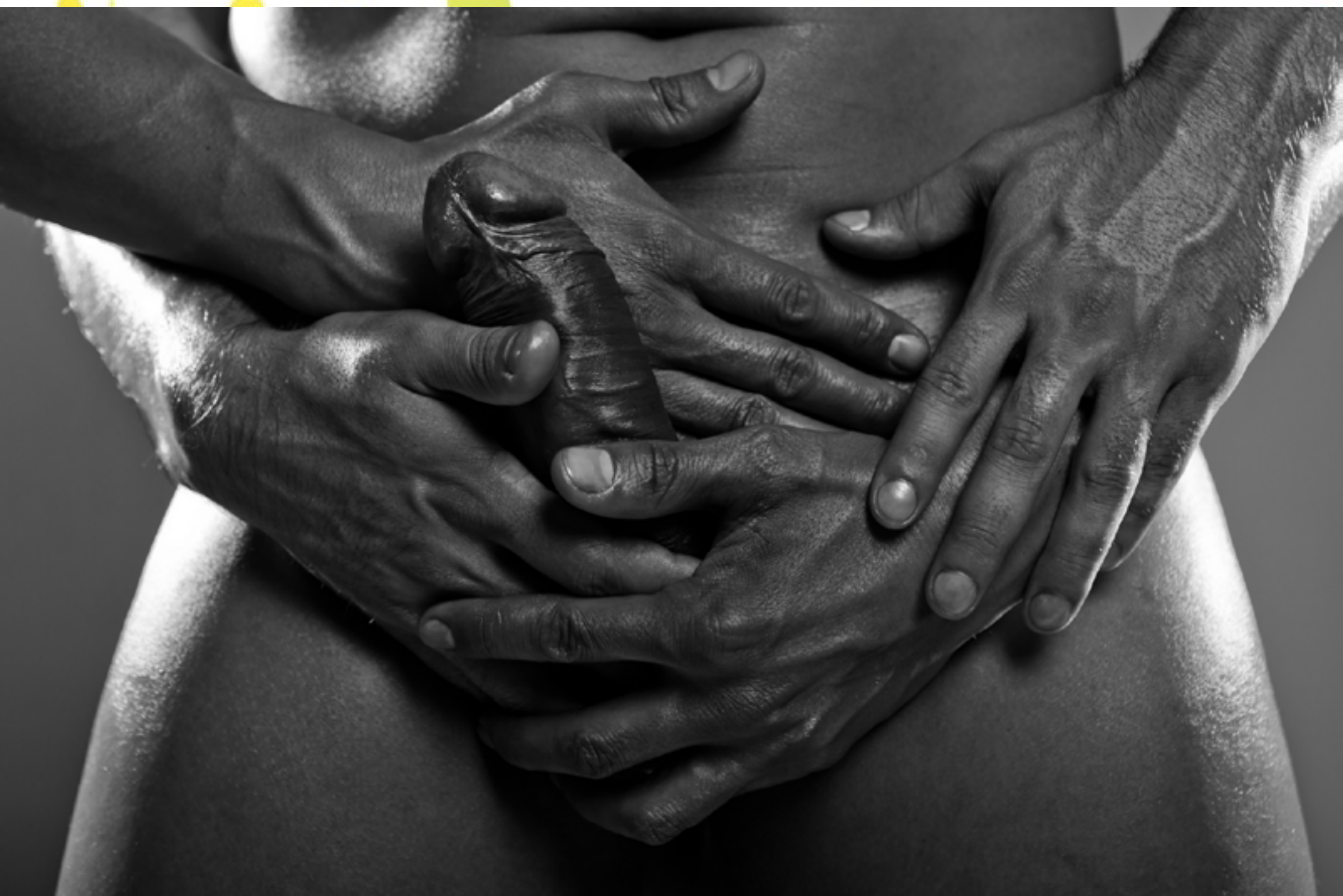
Ekaterina Zakharova

There is a lot of play with gender roles and power dynamics. Is that a reflection of your personal concerns or an artistic choice?

In addition to what I mentioned before, photography is my form of therapy. I was violated before and I have seen violence, so the camera releases my demons and clears me of them every time I lift it to make a shot.



Ekaterina Zakharova



Ekaterina Zakharova



How do you interact with your models to let them let go of their inhibitions and be so revealing?

It is about a connection. A photographer has to be empathetic to feel a model's struggle and to inspire its revelation in front of a camera. I always try to improve my instincts to be at the same level as a model, to be able to catch a shy move and turn it into a wave of expression. It is a very intimate moment since every second in the studio can be relived only through those pictures. For some of my models, a long, deeply philosophical discussion about the value of a session sets the mood, for others silence is the king and simple instructions help a lot. It is truly different for everyone and it is different for me in every session.





Ekaterina Zakharova

When do you feel that you have achieved what you want from a session?

The moment always comes as a surprise. Here I am in the moment, everything is electric from the highest voltage, model is shaking from exhaustion, I feel the weight of a camera with every second passing, and the only signal is my head is more, more, more. I need to run, be fast, adjust some tiny details in my view, yell at the model to focus and then...boom. In my head it is like someone just turned the lights off. Done. Finale. Everyone collapses.

Ekaterina Zakharova



Ekaterina Zakharova



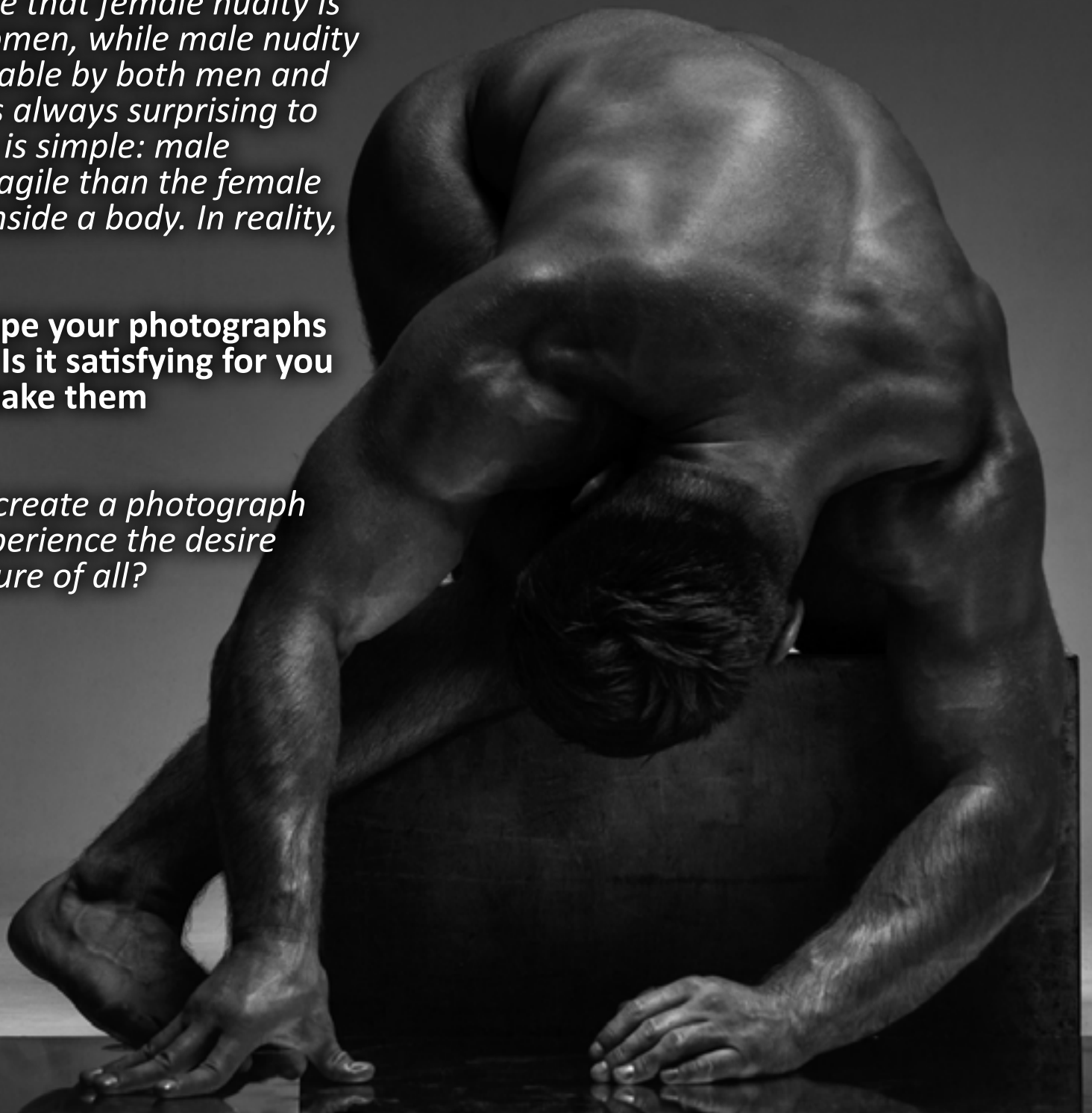
Ekaterina Zakharova

Why do you think the mainstream (with Facebook being a prime example) is so negative towards depictions of sexuality and nudity?

I don't have any research proving my statement but I am sure that female nudity is usually criticized by women, while male nudity is considered unacceptable by both men and women. Usually. It was always surprising to me. Maybe the reason is simple: male genitalia looks more fragile than the female which is hidden deep inside a body. In reality, I simply don't know.

What effect do you hope your photographs have on an audience? Is it satisfying for you to arouse a viewer? Make them uncomfortable?

It is a challenge. Can I create a photograph worth looking at to experience the desire and the greatest pleasure of all?





Ekaterina Zakharova



What makes a photo erotic?

Every picture is an expression of a viewer's emotion, the level of intimacy he/she has with a piece while looking at it. For someone, it is an aroused penis, for others it is an intimate moment of truth in feeling wanted and loved. Erotica is everywhere and for me the best visualization is a thread of a water on a tongue barely touching a nipple. It is as beautiful as it is erotic, don't you think? Everything is connected.

What makes a photo a work of art?

If you ever find out, please let me know.





Ekaterina Zakharova



Ekaterina Zakharova

What would your dream photo shoot be?

I am dreaming of an underwater photo shoot, if that's what you mean. Honestly though, my biggest dream is to have the freedom to express myself, to let my models show their faces and be proud of who they are. Especially, because I have someone special by my side who supports me every step of the way and inspires me to do more, I want to have the right to be open, honest and live my life without looking over my shoulder every time I post a picture on social media.

What is the most important thing you have learned from creating your art?


I have to work more. And more. And more.





Ekaterina Zakharova





You have had censorship problems which explains why your work appears on so many different and scattered sites. Is there anywhere our readers can see a collection of your works? Purchase your work? Are there plans for books, exhibits or calendars outside of Russia?

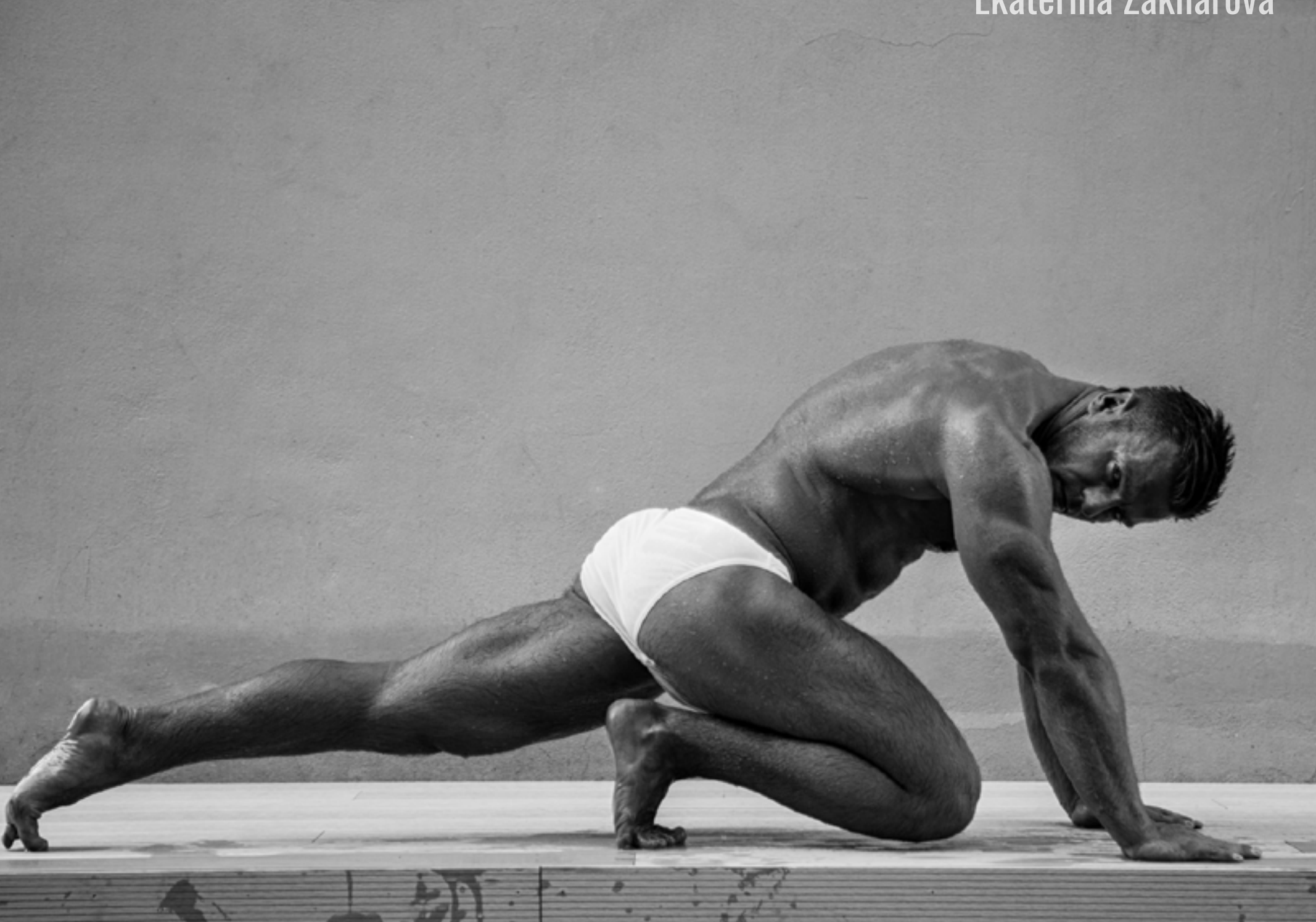
Yes, I am regularly banned from Facebook from three days to three months. But looking on the bright side, it saves me a lot of time to do something more meaningful than spending that time on social media. I have some of my work at zakharova.deviantart.com - if interested, a one can buy it directly from the site. Also, I have been honored to display some of my pieces in the Dylan Rosser galleries among a crowd of brilliant photographers. More details are at gallerymale.com



Ekaterina Zakharova



Ekaterina Zakharova





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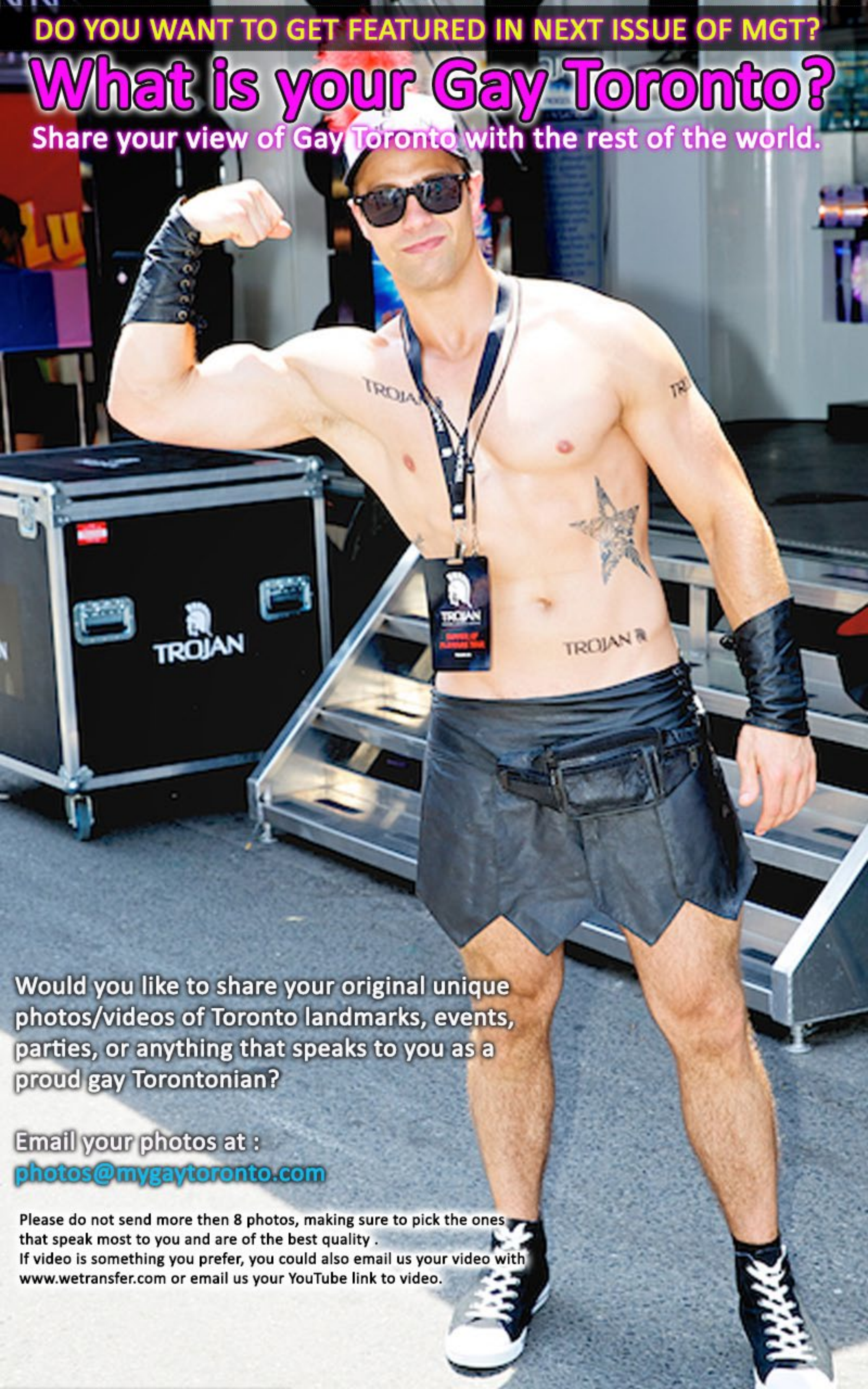
SEAN LEBER



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documenting Cecil Beaton's fleeting moments of fabulousness

DREW ROWSOME ★★★★★



There is a moment in the documentary *Love, Cecil* where the content transcends the form, transcends reality. Truman Capote and Diana Vreeland sit perched in a red-shellacked over-decorated room - Vreeland's parlour? office? her red obsession is well documented - cattily gossiping about *Love, Cecil's* subject Cecil Beaton. It is a gay wet dream that builds to a climax as they agree that Beaton hated a lot of people. They giggle and the film cuts to Beaton naming the people he loathes and why, while glorious images, many shot by Beaton himself, of the various stars and society stalwarts he is slandering fill the screen.

It is camp gay high bitter queen bitchery at a level that will probably never be equalled.

Love, Cecil is otherwise a conventional biographical documentary. Fortunately Cecil Beaton was utterly unconventional and layering any artifice over his layers of artifice would have collapsed the entire production into an excess worthy of Beaton at his most precious. *Love, Cecil* begins with Beaton's childhood and then progresses chronologically throughout his life and his series of artistic pursuits. It is all illustrated with the photographs, including many carefully constructed self portraits, that Beaton created. Because the man essentially invented fashion photography, the images are mesmerizing, stunning and worthy of study.

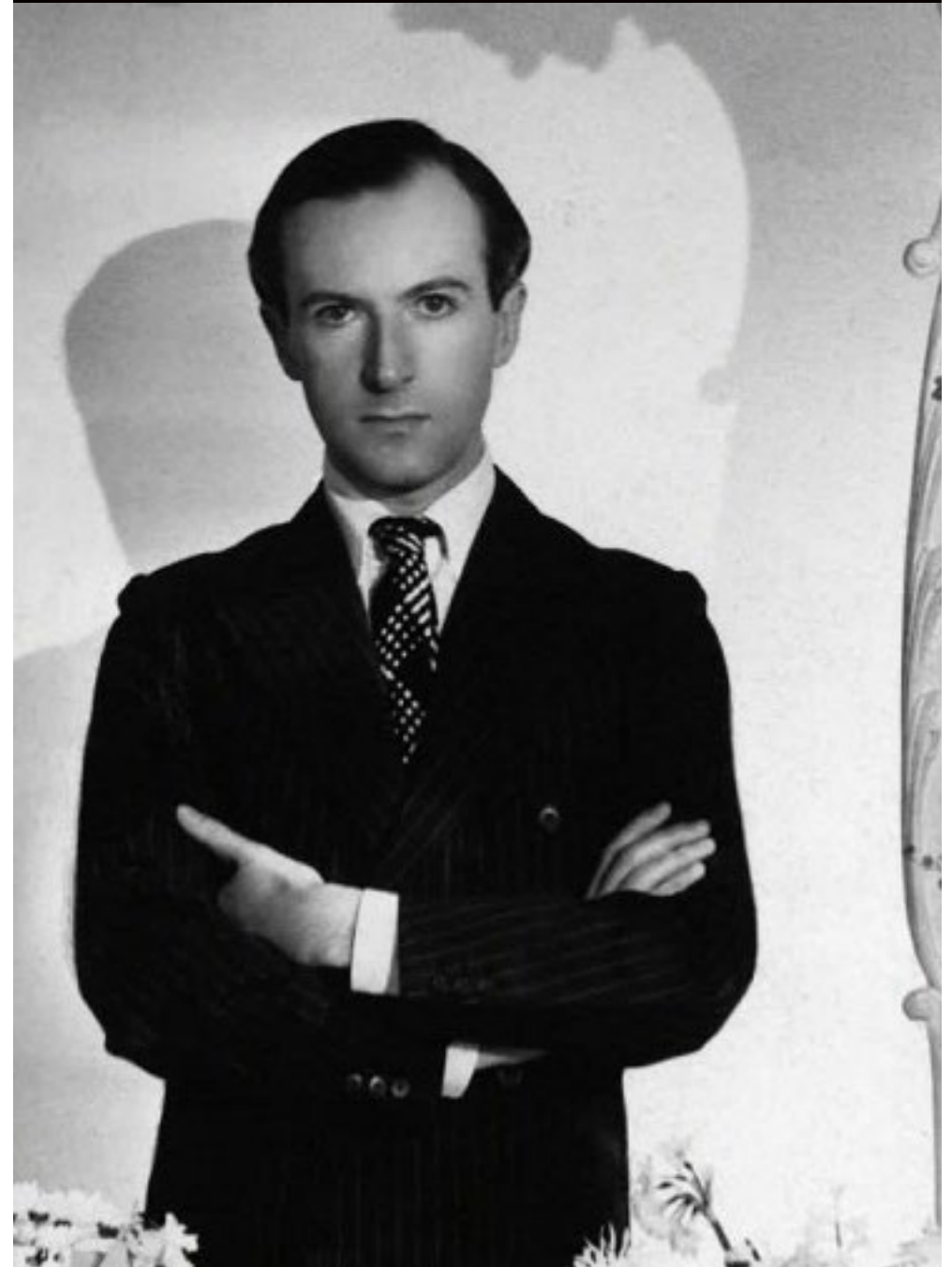
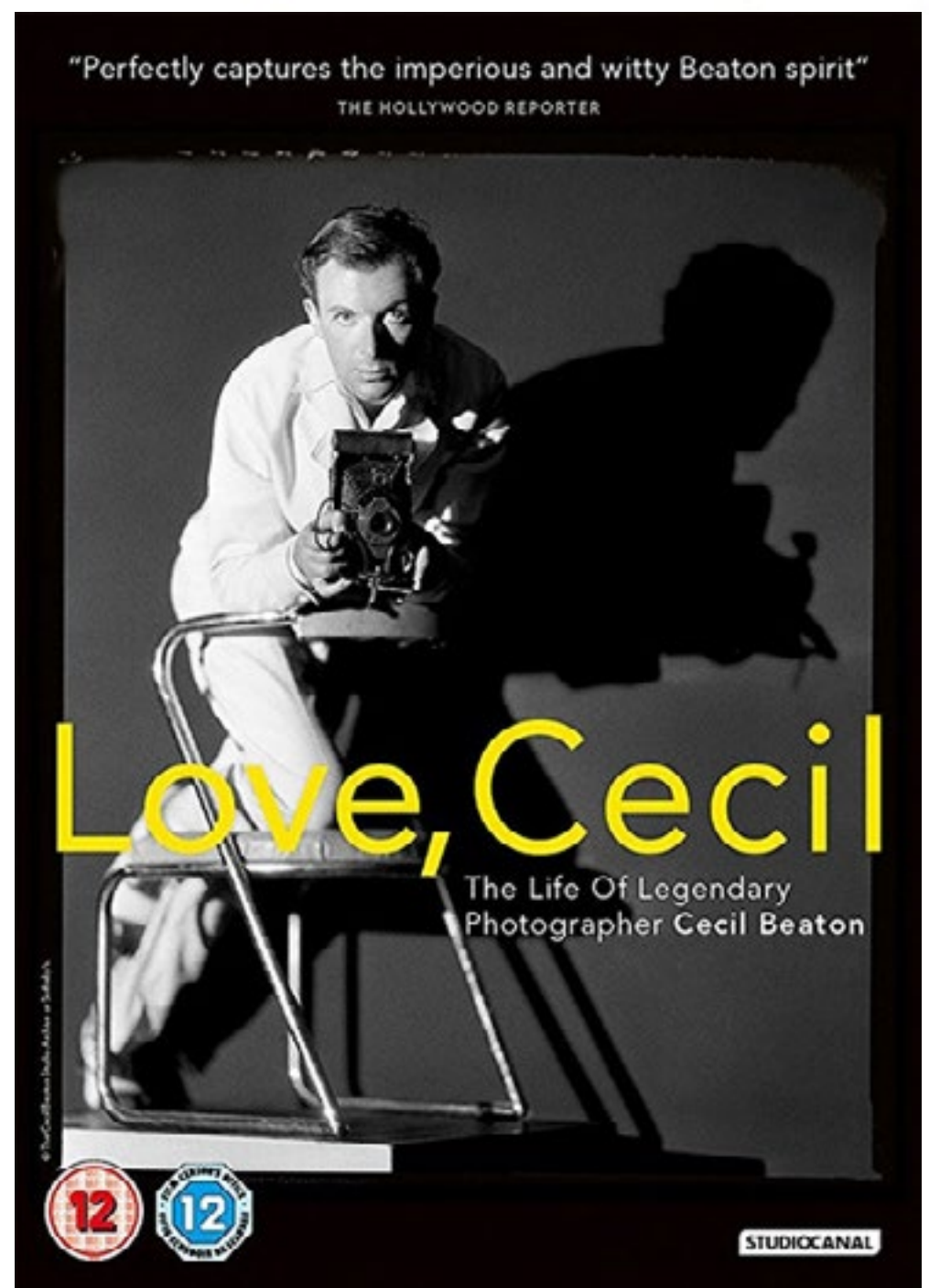


Beaton also kept copious diaries which were, after being heavily edited to avoid libel suits, published to great acclaim and financial reward. Selections are read in the most mellifluous tones by the great orator Rupert Everett (The Judas Kiss, ex-Madonna bff) who also narrates. The sonics are as lush and seductive as the visuals. But not as spellbinding as the man himself. Beaton himself appears in edits from interviews and he is a precisely flamboyant grand dame, utterly sure of himself and his wit and opinions. A brief monologue about hats distills the gay experience, aging and style into an aphorism of wonder. Beaton's vintage interviews would have been a satisfying cinematic experience all on their own.

Love, Cecil lovingly chronicles Beaton's remarkable career from the London suburbs to Vogue and New York to Hollywood to the trenches of the second world war to his obsession with royalty and celebrity. There are tasty tidbits and delicious gossip, and a real sense of Beaton's place within both photography and design as art and as an adjunct to celebrity worship. Director Lisa Immordino Vreeland keeps the pacing swift with just enough louche languor to let the audience catch their breath. She also has a knack of answering questions just as they are being posed. The sexually ambiguous erotic photos of his fellow youthful sybarites call Beaton's own preferences into question. The question is answered before being plunged into more confusion by his affair with the usually lesbian Greta Garbo.

Because Beaton spent his life in pursuit of beauty - and shock value and, not incidentally, fame - his path intersected with most of the celebrities of his time. He shot the coronation photos of Queen Elizabeth but also many portraits of the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson. He designed the sumptuous look of the film version of My Fair Lady and earned an Academy Award for his efforts. He, when still a child, posed his sisters, those "gross little schoolgirls," as faux glamour girls and got them into the society pages. He captured the horrors of war while still injecting a virile homoeroticism into the images. He threw great parties.

He photographed Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper, Joan Crawford, Johnny Weissmuller, Salvador Dali, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger (who had just met at the pool of his hotel), and convinced David Hockney that photography just might be of artistic value. Beaton writes in his diary that, "I took thousands of snapshots and wrote hundreds of thousands of words trying to capture a fleeting moment." Love, Cecil takes a thousand fabulous fleeting moments and arranges them into an enigmatic portrait of a complicated fascinating man. Anyone who can incite envy and cuntiness - anyone who can get them to mention his name - from Capote and Vreeland, is someone worthy of a portrait as loving and scathing as Love, Cecil.



Love, Cecil opens on Fri, March 16 at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema, 506 Bloor St W. hotdocscinema.ca

Adorable Jillian Walsh is Hooking Up

PAUL BELLINI



Jillian Walsh seems so young. Though she will only admit to being “under 30,” she has a little girl quality that makes her quite adorable. Like one of her favourites Gilda Radner, her vulnerability is her strength. The sketch comedian is currently one of the stars of *Hooking Up: Second Base*, a mix of original and archived *Second City* sketches dealing with Tinder troubles, long-lost loves, and relationships of all sorts.

Jillian identifies as “queer, and currently in love with a beautiful woman.” She fell into comedy. “I was serving in a restaurant and there was a group of boys,” she explains. “And they were so depressed, so I tried to cheer them up by playing the ‘obsessed with coasters’ character, and I found out they were depressed because a member of their sketch troupe *The Reception* had just dropped out. So they asked me to join. I said yes, mostly because I thought they were joking, and I just wanted them to tip me, but I went home and googled them and decided to join. We made a lot of props out of paper mache. We did the Chicago sketch fest. It was a big ‘zero to a hundred’ for me.”

Currently a member of both the *Pepperoni Pizza Cats* and *Mein Künt*, Jillian seemed to

come out of nowhere. “I grew up in a small town, on a farm. Really rural. Everybody knew each other. For fun, they go muddin’. People have Confederate flags. Do they even know we’re Canadian? I never go back. My parents are still there, but I don’t have a relationship with them.”

Aside from her stage work, Jillian was also recently the star of a lottery commercial. “We shot it on a moving bus. I felt like Sandra Bullock,” she gushes.

Though she’s still new to the game, Jillian has a clear head about her role in the comedy world. “I find I’m only funny by accident,” she declares with a little too much modesty. “But you can never go wrong if you just aim for a human truth.”

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DREW ROWSOME ★★☆☆



It was controversy in the gay press that first made me aware of *Rise*, a new television series starting on Tuesday, March 13 on Global and NBC. The series chronicles the drama in a small town high school's drama program and is inspired by the book *Drama High: The Incredible True Story of a Brilliant Teacher, a Struggling Town, and the Magic of Theater* by Michael Sokolove. The nonfiction book not only tells the story of the Harry S Truman High School in Pennsylvania's drama program, but also documents the late in life coming out process of its innovative teacher.

The controversy, dubbed "straight-washing," erupted when *Rise* creator Josh Katmins revealed that the lead character in the television series would be and would remain straight because that was easier for him to relate to and write. With the implication that it would also be more commercial. It turned out to be a bit of a misinterpretation and Katmins and the producers have actually worked closely with GLAAD to make sure that the multiple LGBT storylines in *Rise* are accurate and presented sensitively. Intrigued, I reached out to Global's very helpful publicist and received screeners of the first two episodes of *Rise*.

Katmins last project was *Parenthood* and *Rise* is what would result if that show were mashed together with *Glee*. Shot in a documentary cinema verité style and resolutely gritty, *Rise* positions itself as drama. It is actually soap opera (which I mean as a compliment) with multiple storylines hitting every hot topic button imaginable. There is a stage mother, a slutty mother, a mother with cancer, a horny coach, teenage alcoholism, a closeted teen, a transgender teen, a homeless teen, a reference to the opioid crisis, a car crash, religious fanatics, sports fanatics, father issues, sibling rivalry, money issues, sexual harassment, and a bit of song and dance. And that is just the first two episodes.



At first it is a bit overwhelming, with so many very special episode issues being introduced that Rise approaches parody. However by midway through the second episode it settles into a parallel quadrangle structure that is quite intriguing and, by ignoring the plotlines that I found extraneous (and feel free to do the same, with so many options there is, like a box of chocolates, something to appeal to every taste), I became quite involved. My only quibble, and I'm aware it is a personal one, is that the dramatic moments are downplayed in favour of realism so that when the big climax of each episode arrived, there was not enough impact for a wow factor. Of course the opposite would have risked descending/ascending into camp which is not the intention of Rise. It is a fine line and Rise is firmly on both sides of it.

The main gay storyline is indeed sensitively done. Ted Sutherland plays Simon who has traditionally been the lead in all the school musicals. No wonder, not to disparage his talents, but he is the sole male to audition for a role in the controversial planned production of Spring Awakening. His parents are hardcore Catholics so Simon is deeply in the closet, even to himself. So of course he is cast as Hanschen the gay character and, more importantly, is cast opposite the doe-eyed tousle-haired Jeremy who awakens something in Simon. Jeremy is portrayed by the delectable Sean Grandillo who builds on his ability to portray the perfect sexy but non-threatening potential boyfriend that he perfected in The Real O'Neals.

The hesitation, the fear, the family disapproval, and the acquiring of a fag hag as an attempt at heterosexuality are all realistically if not subtly portrayed. And positioned as a counterpoint to what I am going to assume is meant to be the breakout romantic entanglement between the feisty fragile waitress Auli'i Cravalho and football jock Damon J Gillespie who also happens to rap (a cringeworthy scene) and be sensitive. Gillespie and Casey Johnson as the wayward son are given lots of time to smoulder and are being groomed for teen idol status, but I predict they will be lose out to the wide-eyed and mysterious Rarmian Newton. Not that his storyline is any more intriguing or plausible, he is just that fraction of a dimple cuter.

The most affecting storyline is Ellie Desautels transitioning teen Michael. This is the only issue that isn't trumpeted, instead it is almost tentative as if afraid of offending either trans folk or the rabid bigots that fear them. So when Michael wins one small victory and it registers on their face, it is the first time that Rise resonates beyond the soap on the screen. There is the expected spirited work from Rosie Perez as a spitfire drama coach who almost gets sidelined, and Shirley Rumierk will be an intriguing slut with a heart of gold if she is given more to do. And who can resist the resident mean girl Gwen Strickland who is actually just browbeaten herself? As Global emphasizes: "Canadian Amy Forsyth plays Gwen Strickland."



That leaves the dramatic centre of *Rise* and the cause of all the controversy, drama department head Lou Mazzuchelli played by Josh Radnor formerly of *How I Met Your Mother* (where he was also constantly upstaged by a gay). Radnor is a television everyman, blandly handsome and with eyes that suggest depth. He is also in possession of a scraggly beard that is more distracting than it is a serious thespian signifier. The premise is that he is a happily married with three kids English teacher who is in a rut. So he decides to follow his dream and take over the drama department from Rosie Perez and produce forward-thinking and important musicals instead of another production of *Grease*.

This leads to speeches about the power of theatre and how “every one of these kids have greatness inside them.” And frequent admissions that he’s never directed before and doesn’t know what he’s doing so he may be unconventional. And a weird speech from his son about how not being an artist is letting his father down. When Mazzuchelli referenced his estrangement from his father, I actually snorted out loud. The character is just not given any motivation that makes sense. It is all conjured out of thin air by that seductive elixir that is the power of the nebulous desire to be an artiste. It is almost as comically heartbreaking as the *Baskets* mantra, “I want to be a clooown.” The actual barnburner of a monologue on the power of theatre is given by Perez who sells it by sheer force of personality and a backstory that justifies it.



However, if Radnor’s character were gay, or in this instance a closeted gay, it would all make perfect sense, even the blatant *Hamilton* product placement. I can believe that there are straight male English teachers. I can believe there are straight males who are musical theatre fans. I can believe that there are straight males who are sensitive enough to intuit a gay teen’s dilemma and intervene discreetly. I can believe that there are straight males who are well-versed in trans issues. I can believe that there are straight males who direct musical theatre well. I can believe that there are straight males who are always impeccably groomed in a casually chic manner. I can believe that there are straight males who have beautiful understanding wives with whom they appear to have no chemistry or have any interest in. I can’t believe that there is a straight man who has all of the above.

Perhaps, we can hope, that Katmins is hewing to the structure of the source inspiration and that there will be a coming out storyline in the future (and there is one eye contact scene between Radnor and Gillespie that hints at subtext). It certainly would add the opportunity for more drama and meaty material for Radnor to sink his teeth into. In the meantime I’m going to give *Rise* the benefit of the doubt and am involved enough to sample a few more episodes once the series starts its run. I need to know what happens to Jeremy, Simon and Michael. And hopefully eventually Mr Mazzuchelli.

Rise airs on Tuesdays at 10pm beginning Tues, March 18 on the Global Television. globaltv.com

Chords for the Dead

DREW ROWSOME ★★☆☆

Just under five years ago, I had the distinct pleasure of making the acquaintance of author/activist Sarah Luddington. Her book *Lancelot and the Wolf* had caused a stir because of its gay content and, being an Arthurian fanatic and then working at *fab* magazine, I read the book and then contacted her for a story. Since then, Luddington has been busy: the *Knights of Camelot* series now numbers eight novels, and she has also written two vampire tales and an intriguing horror/mystery novel entitled *Seelie*. The *Falcon Grey Series - Volume One* which appears to have gay BDSM content.

So when I saw that Luddington had just released *Chords for the Dead: Two men, one love, a ghost and always the music* (*Rock & Roll Mysteries Book 1*) - mixing horror, gay sex/romance and rock n roll (all obsessions of mine) - it was on my tablet in seconds. And once I dove in, I remembered just how much I enjoyed Luddington's writing as she gripped me around the throat and balls as *Chords for the Dead* raced along.

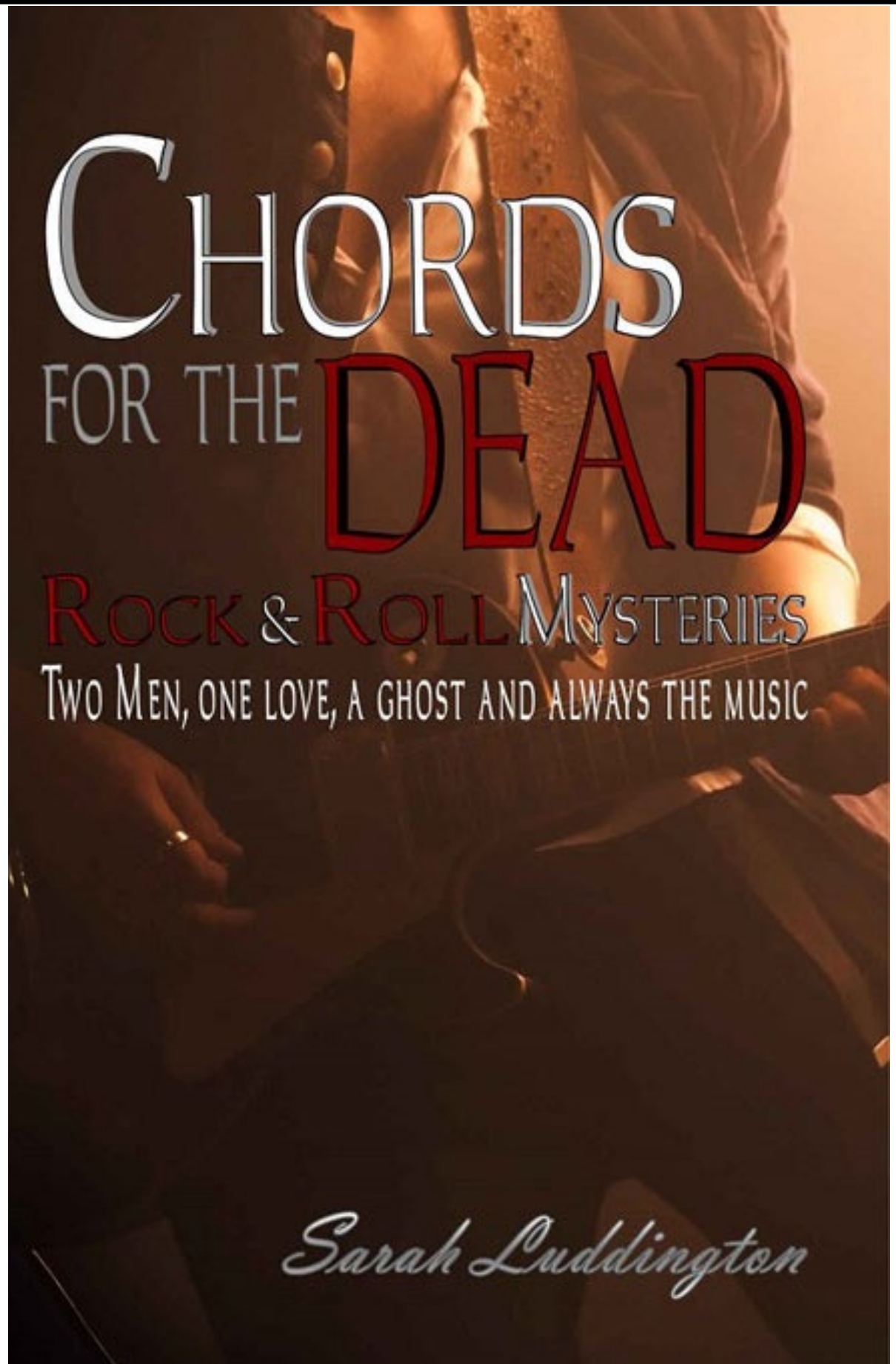
The premise is simple if convoluted: Charlie, a recovering drug/alcohol addict and rock star on hiatus, had a passionate love affair with his bandmate Bastian whose betrayal, overdose and death put Charlie into

a tailspin. Bastian reaches out from beyond the grave to ask for assistance in stopping a grisly series of ritualistic murders so that he can escape some sort of limbo. And he wants to rekindle the romance and take Charlie with him into the afterlife. A psychic witch, and impossibly handsome, policeman Dale is also investigating the murder/sacrifices and, of course, he falls hard for Charlie setting up a supernatural triangle putting all their immortal souls in danger.

Because this is the first in a projected series, Luddington has to create an entire world for the triangle to exist in, and the supernatural elements achieve a grounded reality because the world is plausible and the large cast of supporting characters are all well-rounded and intriguing in their own right - the exposition never interferes with the action. The horror/occult elements are creepy and gory if not as scary as many would like, but there is sufficient suspense in the plotting. And because the characters are so lovingly/lustfully written, we actually care what happens to them. I'm sure I'm not the only one who will find themselves identifying far too closely with poor Charlie.

Luddington gets the music and love/lust connection just right, with Bastian being summoned into mirrors by guitar strumming. She is also quite good at depicting gay sex with Charlie and Dale's lovemaking being tasteful but hot erotica with some realistic flourishes that are very evocative. And there is also another conflict introduced to add to the suspense: they are both tops and Dale is quite adamant about protecting his pucker from intrusion.

Will their love survive the coven out to sacrifice at least one of them in order to raise the dead? A third who is a horny non-corporeal? A sinister demon trying to gain entrance to our world and Charlie's psyche and posterior? Rats and graveyards? Betrayal by both a sinister lesbian and





a jilted straight girl? Dale's bisexuality and Charlie's OCD and addictive personality? The tragic dilemma of two tops in heat?

As much as I appreciate the agony of being torn between two lovers, Charlie's wishy-washiness becomes repetitive (a symbol of his recovery?) and the erotic appeal of tacky tattoos eludes me despite Luddington's lascivious descriptions. There is a fair amount of romance novel tropes but in a gay context they are charming. Chords for the Dead begins with a brutal act of homophobic violence and all the characters deal with internalized, and externalized, homophobia so they have earned the opportunity to achieve ecstasy in each others' arms.

The climax ends with satisfactory ambiguity - Rock & Roll Mysteries Book 2 has to be set up so there is still evil afoot - but the real hook is that the topping issue is never resolved. I will definitely be reading the second book if only to savour the scene where Dale finally gives it up and ascends to supernatural bliss.

Luddington writes on her website - darkfiction.eu - that "I am an old romantic who thinks love makes the world go round. I write love stories, they are violent, action packed and often homo-erotic but they are never dull, at least that's what people tell me." Add that she gets the appeal of rock n roll, and that describes Chords for the Dead quite aptly.



After Wrestling: an exuberant loopy comedy about

DREW ROWSOME ★★★★★



Photos by John Gundy

Indebted both to kitchen sink melodrama and classic French farce, *After Wrestling* is impossible to synopsise or possibly even explain. Both hilariously funny and utterly tragic, it is best just to surrender to the ride and, like the characters, believe that everything will work out somehow. And miraculously it does.

A loopy comedy intimately concerned with mental illness, suicide, the afterlife and the difference/similarities between love, lust, obsession and sex, *After Wrestling* moves, at a breakneck pace, switching locales, time periods, moods and forms of reality with abandon. All confusion is deliberate, there are secrets to be concealed and revealed, and never for a second is the audience in doubt about what is happening or where. Except when they aren't. The soundtrack is slanted towards mid-'80s Bowie, all glistening catchy surfaces with a dark deep fear just underneath: a perfect metaphor for *After Wrestling*.

There is also a gleeful casually clever stagecraft involved. Blackouts are tight and characters appear and reappear through slamming doors or hidden entrances. Several distinct locations are created out of a combination of lighting, realistic props and surreal invention.



A restaurant/nightclub gets a hearty laugh of recognition just with the flick of a switch. Even a fictitious hallucinated radio station becomes a very real and grounded place. The split second timing gives *After Wrestling* an exuberant rush, that uniquely theatrical energy that anything can happen.

In hindsight the characters are over-exaggerated, cartoonish like wrestlers, but while in the moment, the actors seize the oversized passions and render them solid and endearing. It is a task not to be underestimated. Libby Osler begins as the voice of reason, the centre around which the rest spin, before accelerating out of control herself. Anthony Shim's character Gibby is dead and lives as a mutable memory. When the two characters unite in duet of grief and regret, it is painful and beautiful to experience, and perversely heightens the comedy around it.

Charlie Kerr, also a co-writer, has the strangest and most far-ranging arc. From a frenzied half-naked monologue explaining a breakdown, through love lost to the darkest one-liner imaginable, he is a whirlwind of angst, grief and bravado. His opposite is Gabe Grey as the impossibly handsome and impossibly thick-headed police officer/wrestler/karaoke singer who strolls into the trio's orbit. He also has a habit of pronouncing cryptic lines that sound like important metaphors while struggling to be the decent man he believes he is. He also gets the most ferocious moment, playing an emotional breakdown simultaneously with a parody of an emotional breakdown. And all set to A-ha.



The other co-writer Bryce Hodgson also directs and his ability to unleash a frenzied tornado of comic action that builds into a tsunami of grief is unique. The plot is absurdly convoluted and implausible yet conjured with documentary precision. He also designed the set which is crammed with details, including a lovingly dishevelled kitchen table littered with take-out food containers and what appears to be filthy dishes. Though it never figures in the action, the chairs are never used, there is this small telling corner of the stage that we recognize as real and the stage is grounded as *After Wrestling* launches itself into the great surreal unknown.



The wrestling metaphor stated in the title - and yes spandex is worn but not by who one would expect (and had hoped for) - is not just about masks, trash talk and false bravado. It is also about wrestling with life, grief, trying to survive and escape a headlock. But it's also about wrestling narrative and theatre into a compelling form, wrestling ideas into some form of coherence. Letting the pauses breathe in the midst of a maelstrom of words, wrestling conflicting desires into a compromise or a form of adulthood. Wrestling one's demons. And trying to figure out what happens *After Wrestling*.

**After Wrestling continues until Sun, March 18 at Factory Theatre, 125 Bathurst St.
factorytheatre.ca**

Bunny: battling sexual repression with comedydeath

DREW ROWSOME ★★★★★



Photos by Cylla von Tiedemann

Bunny is a very funny play with a star turn by the remarkable Maev Beaty. It is also an attempt to reconcile the muddled morals and popular appeal of Victorian literature (Jane Austen, George Eliot, etc) with contemporary mores and feminism. An ambitious undertaking that is somewhat upended by the #MeToo movement which the play's creation predates. Fortunately that only makes Bunny all the more intriguing. And more daring than probably intended.

Beaty plays a woman, Sorrel, raised by left wing intellectuals in a bubble. She is an outcast, a weirdo, in public school until she hits puberty and discovers she is attractive. And that she likes boys who suddenly like her back. Beaty speaks directly to the audience in monologues that refer to her character in the third person. She is hilarious and heartbreaking as she notes that she is probably the only girl ever to have "kissed 19 boys and won the science award." She is exceptionally intelligent and woefully naive of social structures, she is a sexually liberated Austen heroine.

Sorrel discovers ecstasy in the arms, and other fine anatomical features, of farm boy and football player Justin. Tony Ofori plays Justin with a sexy casual charm, an equivalent naivety, and just enough teenage male smarm to make him realistic. When Sorrel decides to move on out of sheer boredom and lack of intelligent conversation, Ofori is broken hearted and a casualty. Sorrel comes into her own at university but never gets over her social awkwardness or her sexual appetite.



She vacillates between the joy and guilt of being branded a slut.

She is befriended by free-spirited Maggie who, unfortunately for Rachel Cairns (Hamlet), is more of a plot device than a character (in a Wasserstein play or a Streisand movie she would be the gay bff). She, before being reduced to a Beaches reference, introduces Sorrel to her brother Carol and Sorrel begins to date him seemingly just because his being a successful businessman and trust fund baby will annoy her Das Kapital reading parents. It doesn't hurt that Carol is played by Matthew Edison (Sextet) who, out of business drag, is tall, dark and handsome. But she also conducts an affair with one of her professors, a married man.

Cyrus Lane (A Christmas Carol) as "The Professor" exhibits crack comic timing (and a fair amount of butt crack) in sequences exploring



guilt, desire and the sordid appeal/horror of seedy hotel rooms. Sorrel muses that Victorian heroines always had to choose between two men, so Sorrel uses *The Professor*, moves on, marries Carol and then comes full circle when she ambiguously succumbs to a just post-teenage hunk Angel (Jesse LaVercombe). The name "Angel" is not the only heavy-handed symbol: Maggie nicknames Sorrel "Bunny" as in the title of the show and as in fucks-like-a, and Maggie's daughter bears the ominous Wedekindian moniker "Lola."

It is blissful, and still sadly unique, to watch a woman be rapacious and strain against the bonds of society. And to, possibly, not be punished for it. We haven't really come that far from the Victorian era. If the character of Sorrel were male, it would be a standard Philip Roth or Woody Allen narrative and those are now creepy. The scene changes where the men gather around Beaty and change her costume are very disturbing in today's context, and hint that she may be paying more of a price for her sexuality than Bunny lets on.

Of course the analyzing doesn't come until after *Bunny* is finished. Beaty is in perpetual mesmerizing motion, riding playwright Hanna Moscovitch's precise words from emotion to emotion. The phrases are clipped and full of pauses, the opposite of the frequently mentioned "long sentences" in the Victorian literature Sorrel loves to read. The monologues have the best quality of stand-up and the entire text has the quality of struggling to express the inexpressible while exploiting the full comedy of human frailty. Beaty gives an olympian performance in a gold medal play.

The ending is abrupt and the Tarragon's left-leaning audience laughed a little too hard at the mockery that flew their way, but it is impossible not to be seduced by *Bunny*. And impossible not to consider that sexuality, and the control and abuse of it, is a continuum stretching back centuries and is still a matter of debate. But when a comedy of manners is grounded by a performance as fearless and complete as Beaty's, *Bunny* is a worthy heir to Austen.

Bunny continues until Sun, April 1 at Tarragon Theatre, 30 Bridgman Ave.
tarragontheatre.com



Gold Dust Woman: the mystery of the mystical Stevie Nicks

DREW ROWSOME ★★☆☆



Stevie Nicks turns 70 in May of this year and though she has been a scrutinized celebrity for most of her life, she is somewhat of a mystery. That may be deliberate, she is an expert at giving intimate interviews that play to her persona and just add to her mystique. Or they might even be intentionally misleading. For anyone who isn't familiar with the basic outline of her story - her journey from fresh-faced chick singer to superstar to drugged-out joke to feminist survivor icon - *Gold Dust Woman* covers the entire saga. But when the recording of *Rumours* has already been an entire book on its own, there is an inevitable amount of condensing and omission that has to be done.

As a fan, I have a complicated relationship with Nick's persona and music, she can elicit eye rolls as easily as she elicits admiration and the desire to protect her. I own all her albums (2014's *24 Karat Gold* being the most recent) and there is always a thrill of anticipation when I hear, even if it's just in my head, the guitar stutter that opens the "Edge of Seventeen." Leaving the theatrical concert event *Rumours*, I was humming the hits, weeks later it is the haunting refrains of Nick's songs that are still surfacing unbidden. So I admit that I am not approaching a biography without bias, expectations or assumptions.

Gold Dust Woman is Stevie Nicks' biography but her songs have been part of the soundtrack of my life, so the associations can't help but bleed into my reading of the text.

I have a similar love/hate for Led Zeppelin, who incidentally, I learned from *Gold Dust Woman*, were a major influence on Nicks. She often encores with a cover of Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll" that varies from transcendent to sacrilegious - there are many versions on YouTube, I of course like the one with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, it genuinely rocks while also being utterly camp, Nicks sounds great but her eyes betray how stoned she appears to be - and when Robert Plant himself gave his approval, she felt vindicated. *Gold Dust Woman* quotes Nicks saying,

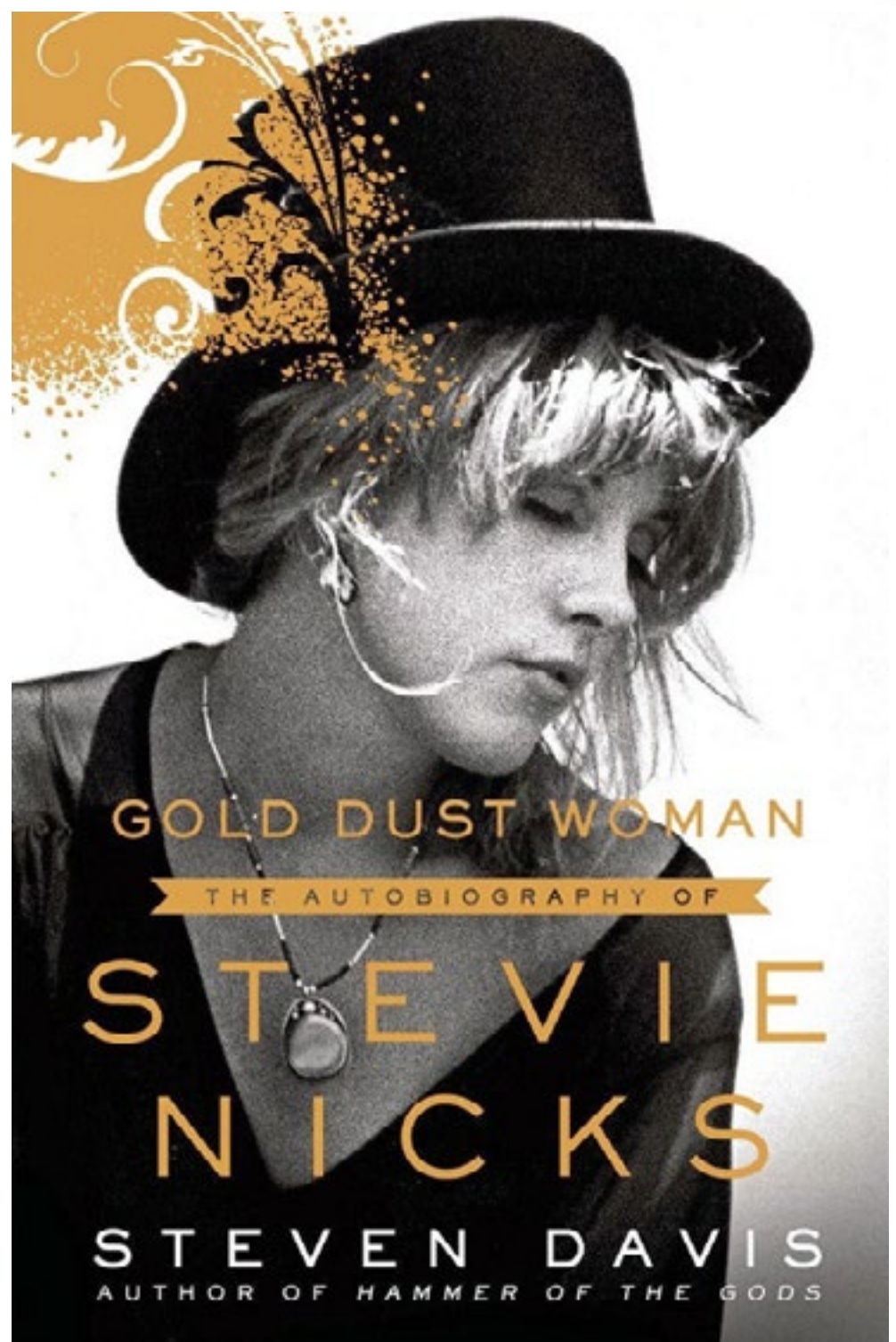
Robert Plant was there on the side of the stage and he congratulated me after our performance. He told me I did a great job. That meant the world to me - one of the great rock-and-roll moments of my life. I think Robert Plant and I are kindred spirits. I think we are both connected to the mystical side of things - but on different sides of the world.

That anecdote and its slant are my main problem with *Gold Dust Woman*. Author Stephen Davis has also written *Hammer of the Gods*, one of the two Led Zeppelin biographies I have read. Googling I discovered that, sadly, it was not the salacious one that I particularly enjoyed. But both detailed not only the context of the creation of the music but also the personal events and misadventures, particularly the sexual exploits for which Zeppelin was legendary. Nicks is also legendary for her exploits and the list of her liaisons is a long one.

But where the Zeppelin trysts are treated as conquests and awe-inspiring, *Gold Dust Woman* portrays Nicks' exploits as relationships where she was either a healing mother figure or using her sexuality to get, particularly with producers, what she wanted. Sexual relationships, even brief ones, are usually much more complicated or, in one anecdote that is glossed over, much simpler. Davis writes of Nicks' starting a sexual relationship with a band member that only existed for the length of the tour and, within the tour only for the length of time they were on the tour bus. When he offered to leave his girlfriend and move in with Nicks, she purportedly informed him that this wasn't going to work outside the tour bus parameters. Davis presents this as mildly shocking which, compared to Zeppelin's admired casual debauchery, seems unfortunate and sexist.

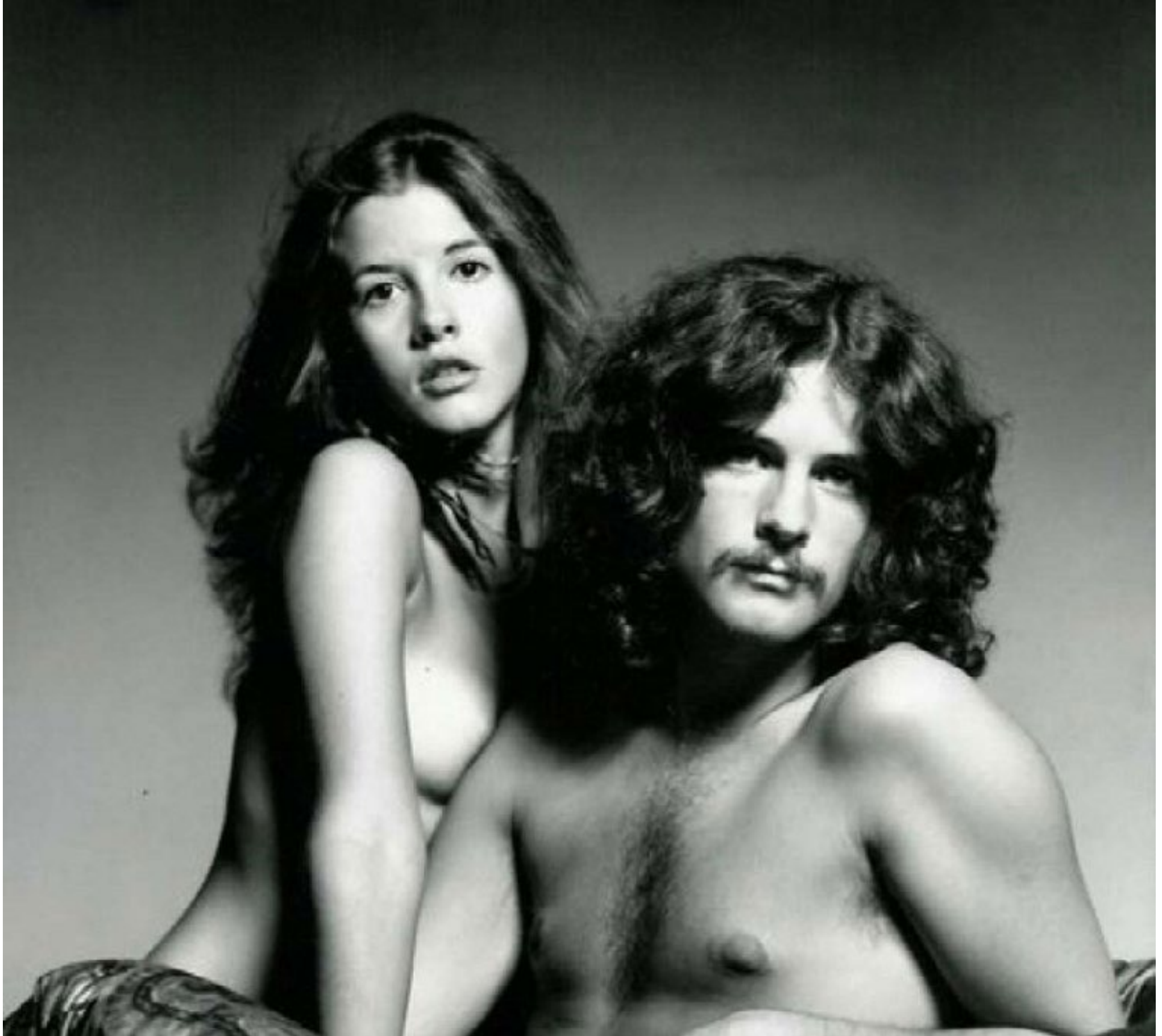
Nicks' relationship with Lindsey Buckingham, which forms the core of the Fleetwood Mac mythology, is examined in depth. We will probably never know how much was sincere love and hatred, and how much was manufactured for publicity and financial gain. Nicks and Buckingham, considering how much cocaine was consumed, may not know themselves. Davis' thesis is that Nicks felt she was dependent on Buckingham to arrange and edit her songs, to make them work, but when Nicks became a superstar and

Buckingham did not, the relationship could not survive. This framework provides a compelling narrative of a woman finding her own voice and discovering her abilities, which dovetails nicely with Nicks' own current feminist role model persona. And makes for fascinating reading.



As Fleetwood Mac and Stevie Nicks have been extensively chronicled, some of the passages are familiar and there are even gossipy stories that are missing. However I was not acquainted with Nicks' early years, I had the chronology of her houses/sanctuaries and drug addictions in a different order, and found the names of a few of her sexual conquests surprising and thrilling. Davis also does a well-researched job of distilling Nicks' lyrical influences of Celtic mythology, witchcraft, etc, and how they intersect with her personal history. He also almost manages to disentangle most of the resentments, bitter business deals, feuds and infighting that is the history of Fleetwood Mac.

Davis' squeamishness about Nicks' sexual prowess and autonomy also extends to her gay fans who, despite supporting her during the fat and drugged-out years (we love our divas through thick and thin, especially thick), are only mentioned once. And then Davis makes one fatal mistake when he describes the drag queens who were instrumental in turning Nicks from a washed-up new-agey flake to a camp hero from where she could evolve into a triumphant survivor, in a condescending and circumspect way,



Stevie's music, sometimes remixed without official authorization, had been steadily growing in the discos. There was also this thing, "The Night of a Thousand Stevies," now an annual fetish rite in lower Manhattan, where fans from all over the world danced late into the wee hours wearing costumes based on Stevie's wardrobe. (Rhiannon-looking witches were huge; also Arthurian princesses, Scarlett O'Haras, Ladies from the Mountains, and other personae. Some came as White Winged Doves.) Sometimes at these events, Stevie's male fans outnumbered the ladies.

I'll just chalk that up to Davis' unfortunate self-identification as a rocker with a disdain for dance music (though rock and disco are intimately linked and as co-dependent as Nicks and Buckingham were) and ignore the whiff of homophobia by omission. Davis also spends precious ink trying to upgrade Fleetwood Mac's reputation as mellow popsters to that of rock and rollers. That may have something to do with having co-written Mick Fleetwood's autobiography, a project Nicks, as Davis tells us in *Gold Dust Woman*, refused to participate in. It's not only the reader who has baggage.



Nicks famously refused many interviews saying that she was saving her stories for an autobiography. What a loopy and wonderful book that would be! So despite Davis' copious research he is unable to get to the heart of who Nicks really is, I suspect that no-one will ever be able to accomplish that. In the interim *Gold Dust Woman* is a compelling overview, a strong introduction to Stevie Nicks, and a compelling read. Sadly Nicks seems to have changed her mind and *Gold Dust Woman* will be, for now, the definitive version. Davis quotes Nicks in a *Billboard* interview from October 4, 2014,

Because I wouldn't be able to tell the whole truth. The world is not ready for my memoir, I guarantee you. All of the men I hung out with are on their third wives by now, and the wives are all under 30. If I were to write what really happened between 1972 and now, a lot of people would be very angry with me. It'll happen some day, just not for a very long time. I won't write a book until everybody is so old that they no longer care. Like, "I'm 90, I don't care what you write about me . . . I am loyal to a fault. And I have a certain loyalty to these people that I love because I do love them, and I will always love them. I cannot throw any of them under the bus until I absolutely know that they will not care . . . The third wives are not ready. The husbands are not ready either . . . Yes, but you also have to be kind. Just because a relationship ended badly, and shitty things happened, you cannot tell that to the world. But you can write a song about it, in three verses and a bridge and a chorus, that tells the really magical moments.

As always it all comes back to the music which, having devoured *Gold Dust Woman*, is echoing symphonically through my mind. And that's a good thing.



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BIL ANTONIOU ✖✖✖✖✖



“... It’s hard to tell if the film’s conservative flavour is accidental or intentional, having as it does a villain whose lesson to us is that being justifiably angry does not justify all actions, and a number of female characters who, despite being powerful warriors with magnificent personalities and skills, are only in the plot as ancillary objects to mens’ needs. There’s something a bit jarring about a film that turns an entire nation’s issues with systemic racism into the gripes of a bratty criminal, and even more confusing is its taking place in a country where T’Challa’s delightful and highly adept sister Shuri (a scene stealing Letitia Wright) can basically run the entire country from her laptop but is treated like a favoured guest in a place that is all about scientific achievement but determines its political leadership through brutal, man-on-man combat...” [read the full review](#)

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A Bathhouse Alarm

JESSE T.



I meet two friends at Café California for lunch and for once we're not bitching about men. It's so refreshing.

John is going on and on about this perfect new guy he's been dating named Lucas. He tells us how Lucas has a firm stance on not cheating and, in fact, hates cheaters.

"It's always the ones that have to push their beliefs in your face that are lying. It's like they are trying to convince themselves by fooling you," I warn him.

"I need optimistic Jesse not bitchy-queen Jesse right now," John replies.

"OK, OK, I am supportive," I reply to keep our lunch cordial.

"You're so jaded. You have to learn to trust guys. There are good ones out there," John says.

I remain positive from my head to the very edges of my toes, save for a few gimme-a-fucking-break glances at Steve.

The waiter takes our orders, and John wants to go for a cigarette so we join him. We step out to the side patio, which is closed for the winter but open for smokers.

All of a sudden we hear a fire alarm from down the street. We look over but can't make out where exactly it's coming from. After another minute the alarm is still ringing and our waiter comes out.

"Someone pulled the fire alarm in the bathhouse!" He exclaims lighting a smoke.

For those of you who don't live in Toronto, the side patio at Café California is beside the entrance for Steamworks.

A few seconds later the door swings open and a bunch of men in white towels come pouring out into the street.

And that's when we spot Mr. "I hate cheaters" Lucas come out in nothing but a towel and flip-flops.

I grab Steve's arm in disbelief (more so because of the bad timing rather than the cheating). John is momentarily immobilized with shock until he picks his jaw up from the ground and heads down the street.

I expect a gurlfight, but instead John is calm. I see Lucas putting up his hands miming his dismay at the misunderstanding. Either that or he knew he was caught red-handed and accepted his defeat.

Lucas then turns back around to the other men in towels huddling for warmth. John starts to walk back, and I am proud of him for handling the situation with such poise and dignity...until John stops, twirls around, and goes back to Lucas. "Oh no, he snapped," I tell Steve.

John rips the white towel from around Lucas's waist and runs down the street. Lucas grabs his junk in an attempt to cover up and runs after him.

Talk about getting caught with your pants down! Ahh any given Sunday in the Village.



Tumbling

MR. X



I am not on Facebook. At this stage in my life, I probably never will be. And let's face it ... it's dying. The young ones aren't on Facebook. They're into something even more inane. Facebook is more for those people in the late thirties to early fifties who can't yet grasp onto the fact that the 90's are over and the world has moved on. And guess what youngin's ... in ten years, it'll be something else.

I never got onto the Facebook bandwagon for many reasons. I always knew that fads like Facebook (yes, I called it a fad) would eventually pyramid out and become irrelevant or – even worse – obsolete. I also never really thought that my life was so interesting that it justified an update every five minutes. Seriously. Between Facebook and Twitter, I don't know which one serves the narcissists more. This was a recent post on my friend's Facebook page: "God, pancakes are amazing!" With news this noteworthy, I can see why the newspaper industry is buckling.

There's also the whole liking business. And picture posting business. And don't even get me started on the "friends" of Facebook. If you have that many friends, you have WAY too much time on your hands. And if you're throwing your friendship to anyone who does a shout out to you and requests it, I'd reconsider your definition of friendship.

But most of all, the reason why I never got onto the Facebook page was because everyone I spoke to about whether or not I should do it all – ALL – said the same thing: "Don't. It's a big waste of time."

And so, for years, I avoided it. In Facebook, there was nothing appealing and nothing fulfilling. Instead, I found other websites to satiate my online, social media fix. And I think I found something even more useless than Facebook.

Tumblr.

Here is a website devoted to "blogs". When the blog originally came out in the early to mid 90's, it was a great way for people to communicate or share information. In the 1990's, several internet forum software used blog-like templates and followed conversations using the thread concept. In 1993, Mosaic Communications Corporation maintained their "What's New" list – a compilation of websites updated daily and archived monthly, accessible by a special button on the Mosaic browser. Modern blogs evolved to include online diaries, journals, or scripted news. A friend of mine used a blog to communicate to her family during her travels to China. The blog has taken on many forms since its inception over twenty years ago.

And now there's Tumblr.

This is the biggest fucking waste of time on the net. Not so much blogs as much as a series of photographs that one person posts or reposts onto their own webpage. It's like syphilis. The same fucking pictures just keep getting passed around and passed around. You're not going to find the meaning of life on Tumblr. Oh no. You're just going to find pictures of anything you want. Fisting? Find it on Tumblr. Barebacking? Yep, it's on Tumblr. Fisting and barebacking? Guess what ... TUMBLR! Clowns? ... you get the idea.

For months, I looked at pictures on Tumblr, trying to find out the point. I'm learning nothing about the people of post these pictures apart for the one dimension they wish to share. At first, I followed two blogs. Both respectable and pertaining to gay interests. One guy updated his blog more than the other, but they were still quite fascinating. They both posted images pertaining to the same genre so I was intrigued that they were so different in their approach: one, more sexual, the other more sophisticated. But after a while, I got bored. I wanted to see what other images there were. So I searched. And searched. And searched.

But here's the worst part: I'm fucking addicted.

I now follow 27 blogs. All of them gay. All of them sex crazed. I look at Tumblr at work. I look at it home. I look at it when I'm with my boyfriend and I should be making dinner but I tell him I have to "send a quick email" and instead, I'm looking at a guy getting fucked up the ass by a dildo that looks like a horse cock. I get emails sent to me when someone starts following my blog. It's not a "like", oh no, it's much more. I'm being followed.

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Drew Rowsome - MGT Editor, a writer, reviewer, musician and the lead singer of Crackpuppy.
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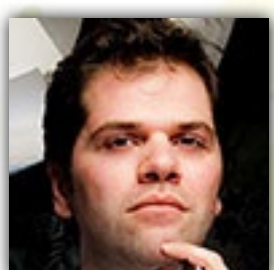
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