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BOBBY McGUIRE

HAPPY
APRIL!

DRAG YOURSELF INTO SPRING



On the cover of April's issue of EDGE's digital magazine, we welcome back downtown theater legend Charles Busch, who is returning to his East Village roots to debut his latest comedy "Charles Busch's Cleopatra." In a similar vein of drag, our Arts column this month checks in with actor/comic/write Drew Droege, whose spot on parody of Chloe Sevigny on his YouTube channel define "binge-worthy." Our Chatter column this month checks in with the forces behind building Baltimore's next big LGBT tourist attraction - a monument to cult film star Divine.

On a more serious note, our travel feature this month chronicles a very personal journey through Poland involving a stops at the eastern european nation's cities' burgeoning arts and gay nightlife scene along with a stop at a site synonymous with the holocaust. This month's Nation column looks at the practice of harmful gay conversion or reparative therapy and the moves being made by lawmakers around the country to have it outlawed. And for those who prefer their art less campy, EDGE check in with Los Angeles' MACHA



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Welcome to

CAPE COD
MASSACHUSETTS

Provincetown

APRIL

- 16 & 17** Miss Gay Mass US of A
- 15 - 18** Patriots Day Weekend
- 22 - 24** Gays for Patsy Annual Spring Stomp!

MAY

- Mid May** ferry service begins
- 20 - 22** Single Women's Weekend
- 26 - 29** Memorial Day Weekend Girl Party
- 27 - 30** Memorial Day Weekend

JUNE

- 2 - 5** Women of Color & Friends Weekend
- 2 - 5** Cabaret Fest
- 15 - 19** Provincetown International Film Festival

JULY

- 1 - 4** Independence Day Weekend
- 1 - 7** Independence 2016
- 3** Freedom Beach Party
- 4** July 4th Parade and Fireworks
- 9 - 17** Bear Week
- 19 - 23** Girl Splash
- 23 - 30** 21st Annual Family Week

AUGUST

- 13 - 19** Carnival Week
- 18** 38th Carnival Parade Day: Back to the 80's

SEPTEMBER

- 2 - 5** Labor Day Weekend
- 15 - 18** National Gay Pilots Association Cape Cod Classic
- 29 - 10/3** Mates Leather Weekend XX
- 30 - 10/2** 11th Annual Kate Clinton Classic



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OH, BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE... 



COVER STORY

GO! 

DOWNTOWN ICON CHARLES BUSCH PREPARES TO KISS ASP AS HE TAKES ON THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME IN CLEOPATRA.



ARTS

GO! 

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A SLIGHTLY PRETENTIOUS FASHION ICON GETS IN THE HANDS OF A HUNGRY IMPROV ACTOR?



THE LOOK

GO! 

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CLICKED

GO! 

PARTY PICS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY



FEATURE

GO! 

TAKING PLAYS ABOUT WOMEN OUT OF THE SHADOWS AT L.A.'S MACHA THEATRE.



TUNAGE

GO! 

SWEDISH POP DIDN'T END WITH ABBA. MAKE POSTILJONEN THE SOUNDTRACK OF YOUR SPRING.

FIT



LOOKING TO GET YOURSELF IN SHAPE FOR PRIDE SEASON? HERE ARE FIVE TIPS TO HELP.

WANDERLUST

A TRIP THROUGH EASTERN EUROPE: A LOOK AT A SHOCKING PAST AND HOPEFUL FUTURE.



CHATTER

A MEMORIAL MONUMENT WITH BRONZE DOG DOO? CHECK OUT BALTIMORE'S FUTURE TOURIST ATTRACTION.



NATION



A LOOK AT DAMAGE DONE BY CONVERSION THERAPY AND THE MOVES MADE BY SOME STATES TO BAN IT ALTOGETHER.

PRAY
YOUR
GAY
AWAY!

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Better Basics

Denim. Shorts. Tanks.

Spring is here, and we're dressing down. But that doesn't mean we can't do it in style. EDGE showcases some of our favorite brands for looking good, feeling good and dialing it back.





Raffi

While the 1980s were no stranger to the knit sweater (we're all still recovering from the Coogi phenomenon), designer Raffi Shaya took the pullover to a whole new level with the creation of luxury cashmere and knitwear for both men and women.

In a season where the temperature can shift on a dime, we love the pure cashmere "sweatshirt" zip mock (\$420) – perfect to layer over a T-shirt or wear under a sport coat on a cool evening. Though the price implies no small investment in your wardrobe, this is a garment that will never go out of style.

**TAP A
LINK**
FOR MORE
INFORMATION

Raffi



Cult of Individuality

Of the hundreds of denim companies worldwide, Cult of Individuality has been drawing devotees since Ron Poisson created the brand in 2009. It's signature rip-and-repair style stands out from the crowd, along with a growing array of wash and treatment-driven collections. In a recent interview with Denimology, Poisson said, "Guys are having more fun with denim washes and rips and distressing, patches, moto-elements, coating and details, all after a few seasons of strict minimalism. And we are certainly the best when it comes to that, so I'm excited to introduce more guys to our cult over the next few seasons."

Whether you're headed to a White Party or just amping up your wardrobe for post-Memorial Day, the Greaser Slim Straight (\$198) delivers premium selvedge denim with a classic button fly and low rise to show off the goods from any angle.



TAP A
LINK
FOR MORE
INFORMATION

Cult of Individuality



Taylor Vintage

Is your idea of vacation more suited to a laidback weekend snuggling in an Airbnb rather than a thumping EDM concert and urban meltdown? Dress the part in Taylor Vintage, which features classic fabrics and a well-worn quality that feels cozy but still offers a contemporary cut. Get more bang for your buck with reversible shorts in plaid and chambray (\$98), and feel confident that this season's "modern prep" will look just as good whether you've got your feet up on the back porch or are buzzing around town.

**TAP A
LINK**
FOR MORE
INFORMATION

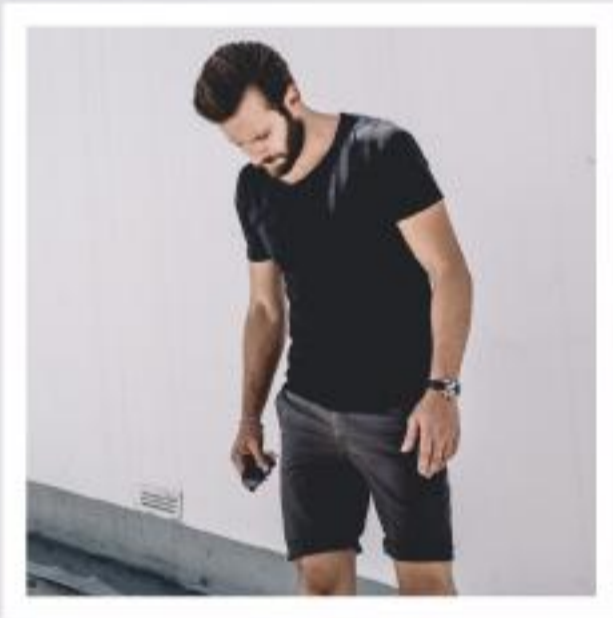
Taylor Vintage

DSTLD

One of the most recently launched brands to jump into the online-only retail pool, DSTLD offers a collection for the modern man with classic pieces in black, white and denim. Add fairly manufactured garments, eco-friendly fabrics and ethical pricing into the mix, and you've got a formula for wardrobe essentials at a price point that won't break the bank. Based in Los Angeles, co-founders Corey Epstein and Mark Lynn are giving e-commerce a stylish, fresh look that can complement any man's wardrobe. We love the slim tank (\$20) – 100 percent cotton and garment dyed – for layering or a day at the beach. **i**

TAP A
LINK
FOR MORE
INFORMATION

DSTLD





LAS VEGAS IMMIGRATION EXPERTS

Immigration law can be a minefield of paperwork, regulations and requirements that, if not properly met, can place a person at risk of losing or never being able to attain the right to live and work in the U.S. Every year, immigration and visa applications are denied for simple reason of missing paperwork, improperly filled out application forms, or not being ready for an interview.

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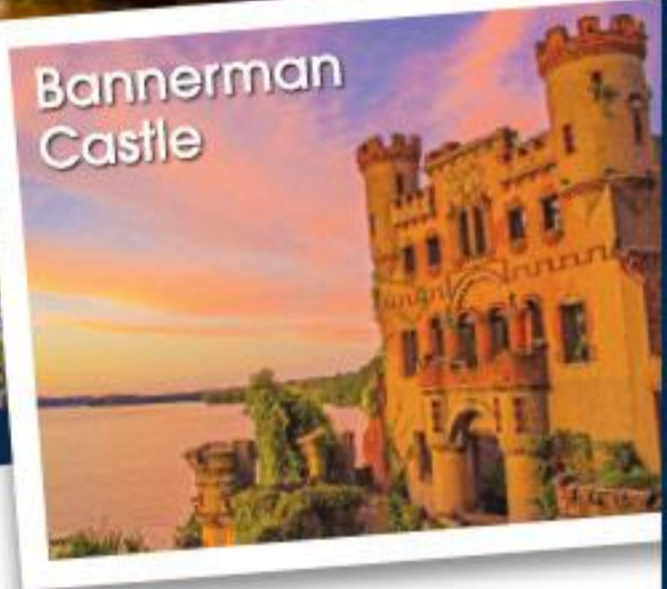
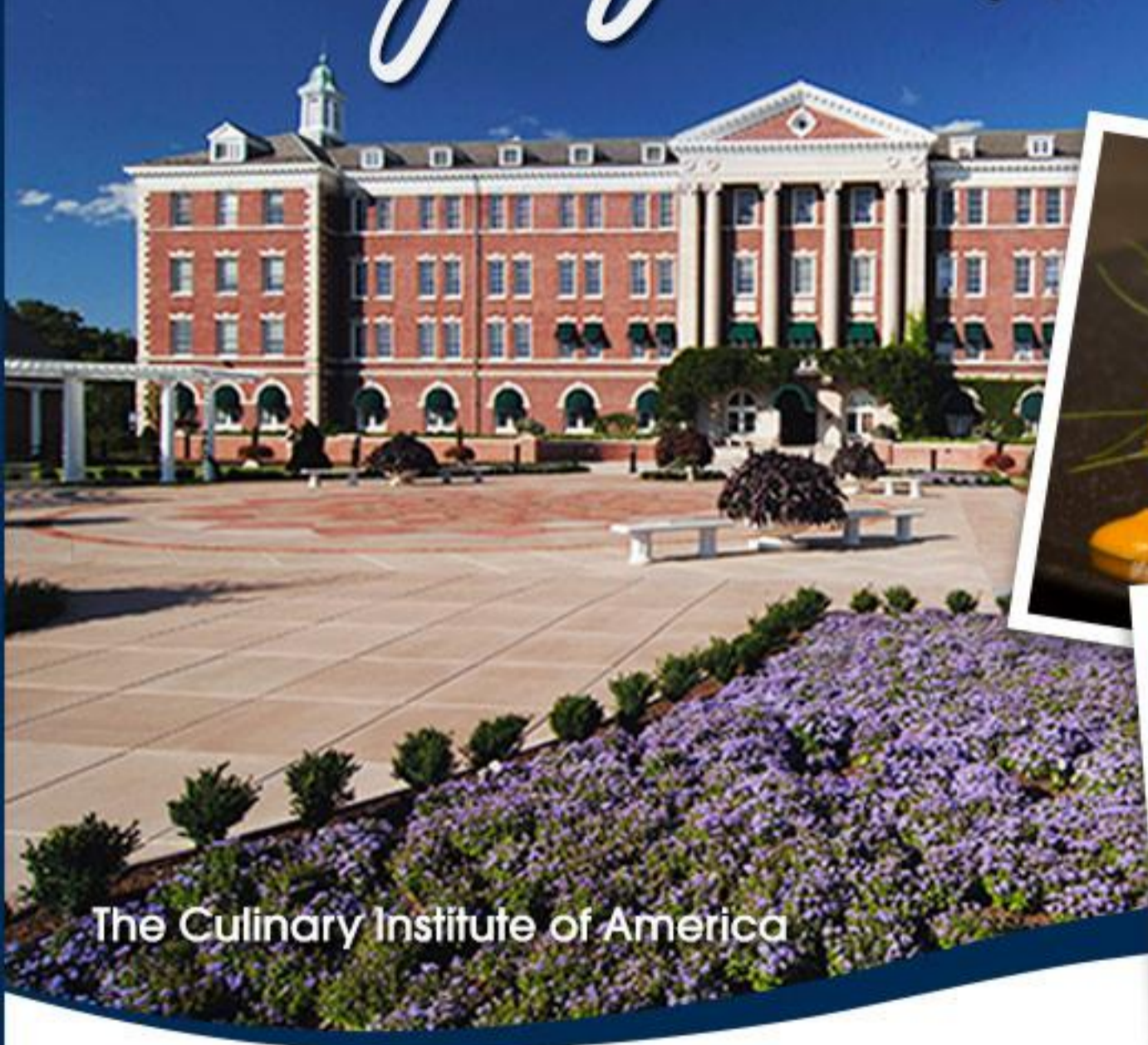
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Do you have any idea how quickly 90 days passes? It goes by so fast that a) you'll be scrambling to be Pride ready during the last 10 days and b) you won't notice that you worked so hard to be Pride ready. So why not choose right now to make your start?

 STEPHEN MOSHER



PLAN

Set a goal. Know what you would like to accomplish, your end game and how you intend to get there. Decide if you want to take off fat and be cut up or put on muscle and be pumped up. Use a calendar and mark off the days. Stick to a regimented training schedule as though you are an Olympian or ninja warrior. Get an app like MyFitnessPal to help stay on target. Start this process with a friend or family member, and acknowledge what areas you will need help with. Take before and after pictures, which are essential for tracking your progress. Make your health and fitness plan second nature so that you never have to think about it – you just do it.

RESEARCH

There are a lot of fads out there, both dietary and training – don't be suckered into believing the latest exercise craze or 12-day cleanse is going to do the trick. There is a science to bodybuilding and exercise readily available if you just take the time to figure it out, break it down and make it work. Find out if the vitamins you take are getting you enough nutrients, and if that protein shake you drink is healthy or simply cake batter. Talk to your doctor and any other experts, or go to the school of Google. Build your personal workout



Get Out in the Sun with Florida's Rainbow Calendar

Gay tourists from all over the world come to Florida to enjoy everything from parades to film festivals to rodeo events geared to the LGBT community. Here's a look at some highlights on the rainbow calendar:

Pride South Florida, Fort Lauderdale (early March): One of the largest Pride events in the state, this is a week-long extravaganza featuring local and national bands performing at an outdoor market featuring an array of food and cocktail booths and a large dance floor.

Winter Party Festival, Miami Beach (late February-early March): The prettiest people seem to turn up for this glamorous six-day party, which takes place during the cooler months in Florida but gets steamy at night.

PrideFest of the Palm Beaches, Lake Worth (late March): PrideFest, a more low-key and family-friendly LGBT festival, includes a parade, vendors and entertainment.

Miami Beach Gay Pride, Miami Beach (early- to mid-April): There's something for everyone at this huge two-day event featuring live bands, parade festivities, family- and kid-friendly activities, beach solrees and evening events for the party crowd.

Sunshine Stampede Gay Rodeo, Davie (April): Sponsored by the Florida Gay Rodeo Association, the Sunshine Stampede caters to the country-western LGBT crowd and draws thousands. There's even a "rodeo school" for beginners.

Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Miami (late April-early May): This festival screens films chronicling the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people.

Gay Memorial Day Weekend, Pensacola (late May): People of all ages and races flock to the Florida Panhandle for GMDW's theme parties, drag Bingo, food vendors and late-night dancing.

Gay Days Orlando (first weekend in June): What began in 1991 as an unofficial LGBT weekend has blossomed into one of the world's most popular and well-known weekends for gay and lesbian tourists.

St. Pete Pride, St. Petersburg (late June): This huge festival draws around 100,000 marchers to the parade in downtown St. Petersburg's Historic Grand Central District and to the area's clubs and beaches.

Tropical Heat, Key West (mid-August): Held in the thick of summer, Tropical Heat's events are male-oriented and most are clothing optional, including yoga classes, pool parties and Happy Hours.

Key West Womenfest, Key West (September): Womenfest is the less risqué female answer to Tropical Heat and is a week of watersports, hot tub parties, dancing, comedy shows, Happy Hours, trolley tours and mixers and matchmaking activities.

Fantasy Fest, Key West (late October): Fantasy Fest is like Comic-Con meets Gay Pride, with a different theme for each year – superheroes, anime characters, cartoons. Don't skimp on your costumes and makeup for this one! Duval Street converts to a mile-long parade and street festival of fantasy and frivolity, and prizes are awarded to the most convincing characters.

White Party Week, Miami Beach (late November): At the world's biggest LGBT holiday party, multiple parties take place over several days, ranging from classy and elegant to hot and high-energy, and the official Saturday night White Party event is the oldest and largest HIV fundraiser in the country.

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JILL GLEESON

Slaying the Dragon

THE LEGAL FIGHT TO
END CONVERSION
THERAPY

It wasn't when Benjy Unger was encouraged to beat a pillow with a tennis racket, imagining it was his mother – an activity that left his hands bleeding and fractured the relationship for a time. It wasn't when he was asked to undress in front of a mirror with others and touch himself as his counselor watched. It wasn't the directive to look at his father's penis in the mikvah, or even the profoundly creepy behavior of his counselor, who likened same-sex attraction to the "nonsexual" erections the counselor might get when his nephew perched on his lap.

There were a lot of horrific moments during then 19-year-old Benjy Unger's 10-month stint in JONAH (Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing), a now-shuttered New Jersey conversion therapy outfit that sought to turn its gay clients straight. But the one that sticks out most in Unger's mind happened toward the end of his time in it, when he'd started to question the validity of what he was doing. "When I got to JONAH I was super excited," Unger recalls. "I was sold on the idea that turning straight was possible and I'd be able to live the life I thought I was going to live. And then it started to deteriorate."



"We had a kind of online support group for people in conversion therapy all over the world," Unger continues. "And there was a guy who wrote that he's married with kids, and he's been in conversion therapy for 15 years, and he thinks he's starting to see some progress. And everyone was like, 'Yeah, that's awesome!' And I was like, 'Wait a second. You've been doing this for 15 years and you think you're starting to see progress? This is something to applaud?' It was a low point because I realized that it was all a sham, but it was also in a way an amazing moment because it got me out of it. That's when I crossed the threshold from believing in it to 'This is a crock of *shit*.' "

Some seven years later, in mid-2015, Unger would find himself in court alongside four other plaintiffs, suing JONAH for consumer fraud. They were represented by attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center, who contended that conversion therapy (also known as reparative therapy; ex-gay therapy; and sexual orientation change efforts, or SOCE) is based on the dangerous, debunked fallacy that LGBT individuals are broken and need to be fixed. Virtually every major medical and mental health association in the country, they argued, has repudiated conversion therapy as unnecessary and ineffective. And in addition to the lasting harm the practice often inflicts on the individual who undergoes it, organizations such as the American Psychological Association



have also noted that it engenders intolerance and inequity against the LGBT community as a whole.

The lawsuit succeeded better than perhaps even SPLC might have hoped. Unger and the other plaintiffs were awarded \$72,400 in damages. JONAH was shuttered. And in a scathing pretrial ruling, Superior Court Judge Peter F. Bariso Jr. excluded the testimony of five conversion therapy advocates, writing "the theory that homosexuality is a disorder is not novel but – like the notion that the earth is flat and the sun revolves around it – instead is outdated and refuted." It was the first time in U.S. history that a court had ruled the premise that LGBT people are sick is wrong. A precedent had been set.

On February 24, with that landmark precedent in mind, SPLC along with the Human Rights Campaign and the National Center for Lesbian Rights filed a federal consumer fraud complaint against People Can Change (PCC), a Virginia-based conversion therapy provider. "The complaint is essentially a request," explains HRC Legal Director Sarah Warbelow, "that the Federal Trade Commission investigate PCC for engaging in fraudulent business practices, both for their advertisement of conversion therapy and for accepting money for conversion therapy."

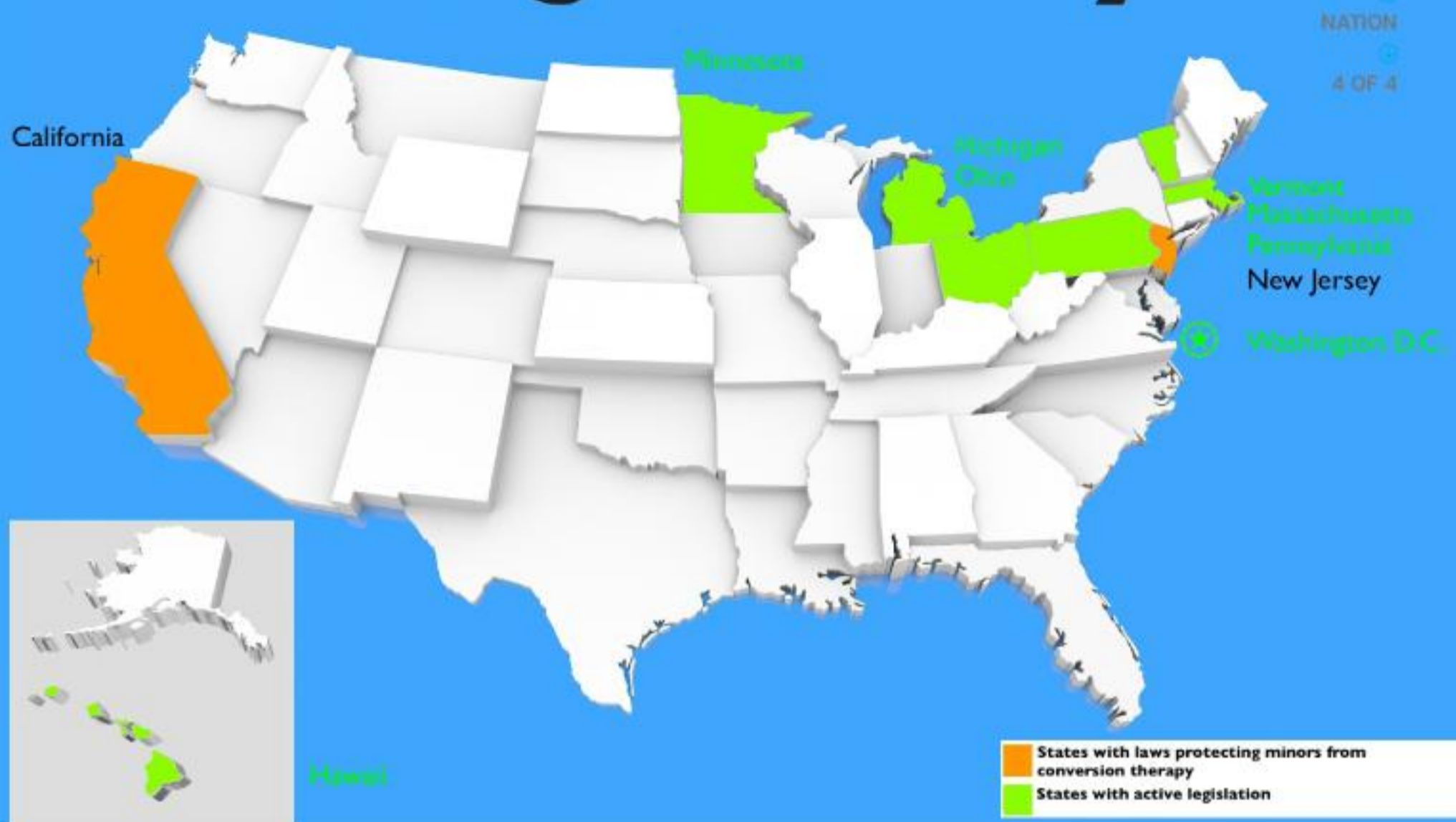


If the FTC finds against PCC, it should prove a powerful tool in the effort to shut down conversion therapists across the country. “The ruling would apply nationwide, because the FTC has nationwide jurisdiction over advertising in interstate commerce,” notes SPLC Senior Staff Attorney Scott McCoy, part of the legal team that took down JONAH. “The other reason why it’s helpful is that many states incorporate federal rulings from the FTC into their own consumer fraud laws, so the ruling will permeate into the states. And then with such a clear precedent attorneys can be emboldened to bring suits on behalf of clients, because they know the chances of them succeeding are fairly high. Plus, the idea is that a lot of conversion therapists will see the FTC ruling and decide to get out of the business.”

Last May, after President Obama called for an end to conversion therapy, lawmakers introduced a federal bill that would implicitly give the FTC the power to go after those who practice it. It remains stalled in Congress, although state and local legislation is helping to move

The First Amendment, notes McCoy dryly, “is not a get-out-of-fraud-free card. If you are going into the commercial marketplace to sell a service, you can’t lie about that service.”

Laws & Legislation By State



the fight forward. California, Oregon, New Jersey, Illinois, the District of Columbia and Cincinnati, Ohio, have passed laws protecting minors from conversion therapy, and 20 other states have introduced similar measures. In February, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced his intent to use his executive authority to ban the use of conversion therapy on anyone in the Empire State under 18. Under his charge, private insurance providers and Medicaid will no longer cover the practice for minors, and mental health professionals will be prohibited from providing it to them. Anyone found in violation of this directive will lose their license.

Predictably, conversion therapy proponents have retaliated, appealing New Jersey's and California's conversion therapy laws all the way to the Supreme Court multiple times. In each instance the justices have refused to hear the challenges, which posited that the laws violate con-

version therapists' right to free speech. But the real roadblock to the practice's eradication isn't necessarily legal pushback – the First Amendment, notes McCoy dryly, "is not a get-out-of-fraud-free card. If you are going into the commercial marketplace to sell a service, you can't lie about that service."

Instead, what concerns people like conversion therapy survivor Norman Birthmark, co-founder of conversiontherapysurvivors.org, is all the practitioners that legislation doesn't reach. "The trend is that conversion therapy promoters evade professional oversight and government regulation by remaining unlicensed and doing it under the guise of religious counseling," he explains. Birthmark, who testified before the Oregon legislature in favor of the bill banning conversion therapy's use on minors, adds, "Unfortunately, it's doubtful we will shut down conversion therapy once and for all."

Michael Bussee hopes that's not the case. Once an "ex-gay" counselor himself, he helped found the infamous ex-gay ministry coalition Exodus. After



"Ex-gay
is a
fraud"


"These therapists feed off vulnerable and uneducated people who don't know better."

one of the men he advised became so filled with guilt and self-loathing that he slashed his own genitals and poured Drano on the wounds, Bussee could no longer deny the harm he was causing. He left Exodus in 1979, eventually marrying one of the men he'd met in his group. In 1993 the couple told their story in the documentary *One Nation Under God*, an award-winning expose of the ex-gay movement. For the next 20 years Bussee remained an outspoken critic of Exodus, until the pressure he and others exerted caused the organization to close its doors.

A retired therapist and co-creator of conversiontherapysurvivors.org, Bussee spends much of his time today working with a Facebook support group he founded for survivors of conversion therapy. "There are about 425 members, and we share our stories and experiences there of how we've recovered," he says. "The thing most likely to undermine and eventually shut down conversion/

ex-gay therapy will be survivors continuing to tell their stories. I think that has been the most powerful thing so far."

While Warbelow acknowledges that some conversion therapists will remain out of the reach of state bans and fraud lawsuits, she hopes the negative attention surrounding the practice will help deter potential clientele. "We find when these bans are put in place, it discourages parents from seeking out conversion therapy from unlicensed practitioners," she explains, "like a neighborhood church — entities that are harder to regulate. If parents know that it's not something that they can go to a regular therapist and receive because it's a harmful practice, they are less likely to seek it out in other arenas. We're already seeing a decline in parents wanting to seek out these services and in otherwise reputable therapists offering these services."

As conversion therapy continues its death from a thousand cuts, Unger has a message for parents. "Look at me: I wanted to kill myself every single day. Even if it's legal, why would you do that to your child?" he asks. "These therapists feed off vulnerable and uneducated people who don't know better. The first few years after I left JONAH were extremely difficult, but I saw an excellent therapist, and I guess time healed me. I'm just living my life and making friends and being OK in the gay community. I'm one of the really lucky ones, but there are others who aren't as lucky. Why put your child through that?" 

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NEXT STOP: REMEMBRANCE

An emotional journey through Poland bridges the atrocities of the past to a future full of hope.

I KNEW I WAS JEWISH BEFORE I KNEW I WAS GAY. And while I loved dressing up like King Mordecai (or Queen Esther) at Purim and scowled each December when Santa Claus skipped over our house in favor of a never-seen Hanukkah Harry, it was the black and white films shown on the cinderblock walls of my Sunday School classroom that truly impacted the story of who I was. These images reminded me how, during one of our darkest periods of history, a threatening force would have preferred to see me dead.

They were the films of the concentration camp liberations at the end of World War II. I couldn't have been older than 11, witnessing the atrocities of a previous generation while my teacher stood in the back, a zaftig woman hunched over with her head held low. I didn't have the mental capacity to understand how such a grand-scale extermination could happen – and to a certain degree, I felt a safe distance from its implication.



Over time I began to understand hate firsthand. In middle school I had itching powder doused down my pants after play practice. I heard the snickering, under-the-breath homophobic comments from my freshman-year college roommate, and then navigated my way through the system to change rooms. I came out in 1989 in the midst of the AIDS crisis – a year when the cumulative number of AIDS-related deaths topped 89,000. There was a time when I thought being Jewish and being gay was

a double whammy, a scarlet A that branded me as “less than” compared to my gentile, straight counterparts.

Then the world began to change. Or maybe it was me. What I once considered a curse became a gift as I explored my gay/Jewish identity—not only in the context of my daily life, but also in my world travels. I have been to the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue in Curaçao – the oldest continually used temple in the Western Hemisphere. I celebrated Gay Pride in Tel Aviv, which last year hosted an alarmingly attractive crowd of 180,000 Israelis and their admirers. I’ve even ducked into the ruins of the Córdoba Synagogue in Spain, a pre-expulsion house of worship dating back to 1315. But this rail trip through Poland would impact me in ways I never thought possible.

KRAKÓW: THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

Arriving amid bleak fields and barbed wire, it’s hard to believe that Kraków Airport welcomes more than 1.7 million travelers a year to Poland’s former royal capital. The facilities are a far cry from my KLM layover at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, which is a destination unto itself. The 10-mile drive to the city center eases me into the Polish landscape that is not unlike the rolling hills of western Massachusetts or any number of idyllic locales throughout the United States – except that this landscape has withstood the test of war.

Unlike most Polish cities, Kraków was preserved because it became Nazi head-



“Only seven synagogues still remain of the 90 that existed before the start of the war.”

quarters for a portion of present-day Poland and southern Ukraine. Approximately 50,000 Jews were deported before a short-lived ghetto was established in 1941. That, too, was dismantled and the remaining survivors shipped off to Plaszow or Auschwitz. Only seven synagogues still remain of the 90 that existed before the start of the war. St. Mary's church still stands proud adjacent to the main Market Square, where hundreds of people congregate at outdoor cafés with a palpable energy that, if not for the guttural sounds of its Slavic language, could just as easily be Paris or Vienna.

Today's Kraków is embracing an emerging art scene, which takes form at MOC AK, a contemporary art museum that opened its doors in 2011. In addition to its permanent collection, MOC AK has embarked on a series of exhibitions that celebrates local artists. But history isn't more than a stone's throw away, as right next door resides the Oskar Schindler Factory. The museum reflects on life in Krakow under Nazi occupation. Those familiar with the industrialist's efforts to save the lives of his Jewish employees can also view his office in its original state.



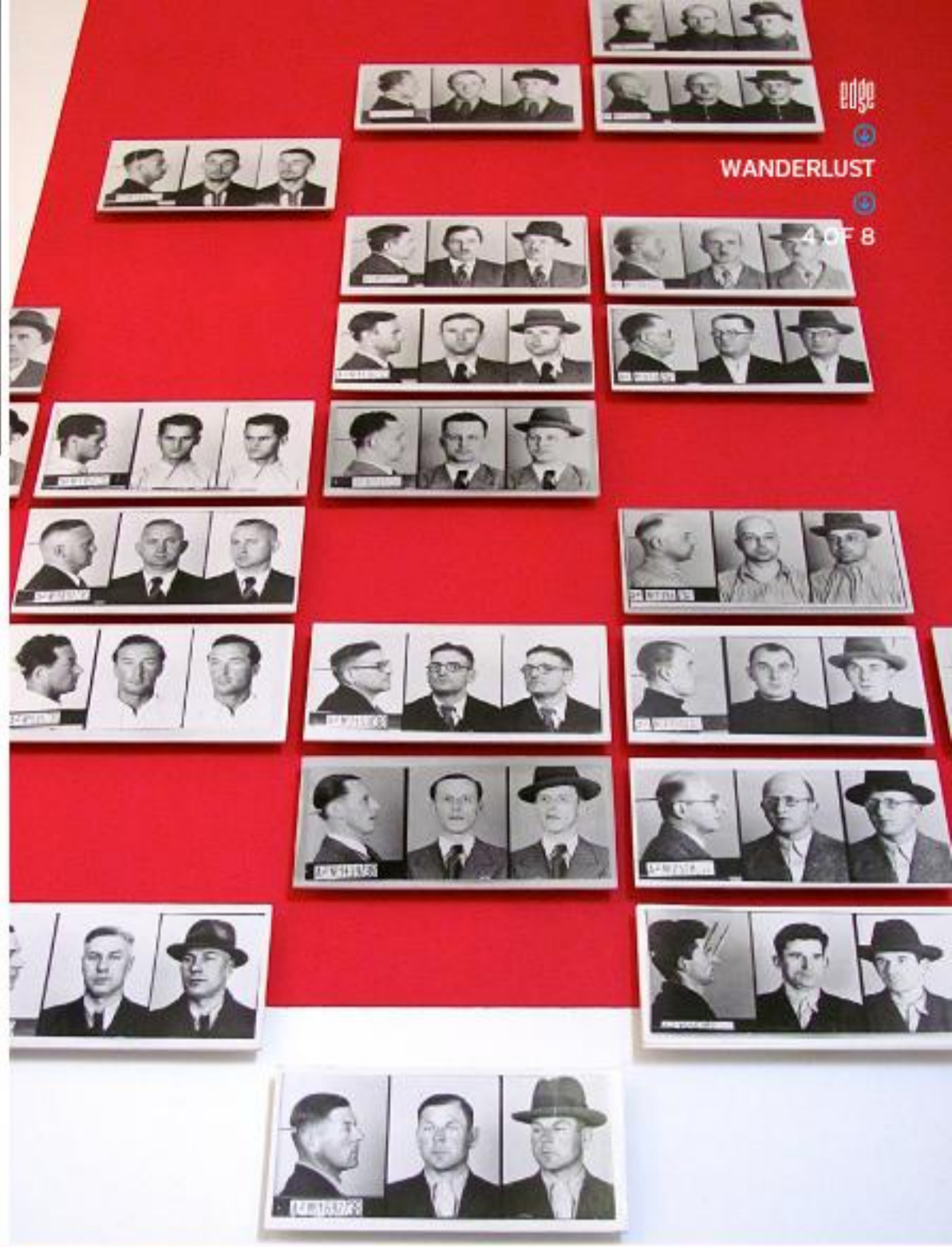


AUSCHWITZ: "WE MUST BEAR WITNESS"

It takes a little over an hour to get from Kraków to Oswiecim, the Polish name for what the rest of the world knows as Auschwitz. My stomach churns as we near the site where an estimated 1.1 million people were gassed to death. In the final days of the war, just prior to the concentration camp's liberation on January 27, 1945, the SS destroyed thousands of camp records, set fire to warehouses full of looted goods and blew up crematoria and gas chambers. From an LGBT perspective, an estimated 5,000 to 15,000 gay men were deported to concentration camps under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code. Many of them died at Auschwitz, but their stories are mostly forgotten. Now, more than 70 years later, an eerie calm hovers over the camp.

Our guide, Anna, solemnly walks us through the barracks and gas chambers, weaving in and out of rooms – some of them untouched while others showcase artifacts that survived the war. We pause at the courtyard between Blocks 10 and 11, where thousands of Polish political prisoners were executed, then move on to "the post," where prisoners were hung with their arms twisted behind their backs.

A fellow visitor moves in closely to take a photo and his sweater snags on the barbed wire, causing him to



briefly lose his footing. We all catch our breath. "Don't move," says a voice from behind, and a young woman steps in to carefully set him free. It's an indelible moment as I consider how many perished where I now stand. How they must have treaded so carefully to avoid that barbed wire, and how – for most – it wouldn't have made a bit of difference. They were to die anyway.

WROCLAW: A CROSSROADS OF CULTURE

Most Americans probably haven't heard of Wrocław, but a scenic train ride through Poland's southwest countryside gives way to the city's epicenter, which at one point was the crossroads of an important trade route through Europe. Spared for much of World War II, it became a battleground between the Nazis and the Soviet Red Army during the war's final months. Hitler ordered the evacuation of civilians, declaring the city (then called Breslau) a fortress. Thousands died in the bitter cold, and by the end of the war nearly 80 percent of Wrocław had been destroyed.

Today's Wrocław cannot deny its past. It wasn't until 1990 that the German-Poland Border Treaty was finally settled, but borders don't define a city's pulse. Wrocław – especially in 2016, as it celebrates its designation as the European Capital of Culture—is thriving in unconventionally creative ways that you'd expect to see in New York City, London or Paris.

Eight curators were engaged to implement “an archipelago of the arts,” one of them Chris Baldwin, who is responsible for two major works as part of the 2012 London Olympics. On June 11, Baldwin's *Flow* will overtake the city as an immersive exploration of Wrocław's building, destruction and rebuilding throughout the 20th century. A new symphony has been commissioned from musicians from the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, and Israel that will be performed by an international orchestra representing those countries. Baldwin will also mount *Sky Web* (December 17), the closing ceremony held in Centennial Hall. Designed by architect Max Berg and erected from 1911 to 1913, Centennial Hall's reinforced concrete structure is a marvel of 20th-century architecture and one of Wrocław's most visited landmarks.



Much like Kraków, nightlife pulsates in Wrocław's Market Square, and I've gotten a tip for an LGBT-friendly hangout, Coffee Planet. From the outside it's your average café with plenty of alfresco seating, but as a travel companion and I nudge our way through the teen-heavy crowd (legal drinking age is 18), we discover a packed karaoke room hosted by a peroxide-blonde, grandmother type with deep eyeliner and bundles of tissues stuffed into the sleeves of her cardigan. The crowd loves her ornery demeanor, and everyone seems to be having a great time until a young Pole reprimands my friend for taking photos. The local is visibly unnerved, and while anger might be his outer emotion, there is a fear in his eyes that makes me question the state of LGBT equality in Poland.

Small victories have been achieved: Robert Biedro was the first openly gay person to be elected to Polish parliament in 2011 (he is currently the mayor of Słupsk), and Warsaw is home to central Europe's first homeless shelter for LGBT teens. Wrocław saw its own Equality March in October 2015 – a sign that change and eventual acceptance may be on the horizon. But public displays of LGBT solidarity and the daily life of being gay in Poland are two different stories that don't always coincide.



WARSAW: PHOENIX FROM ASHES


My three-hour train ride from Wrocław to Warsaw Central Railway Station is precious time to reflect on what I've experienced thus far. The rail system was an integral part of the Nazi Party's plan to exterminate 11 million European Jews. Yet these same tracks are enabling me to connect with my past and explore today's Poland. As the terrain whizzes by I think of my great-grandparents, who emigrated from Russia and Poland at the turn of the 20th century to claim a better life for themselves and future generations. What would have been their plight had they not risked everything to come to America?

Those who stayed and their ancestors are exquisitely showcased at POLIN, the museum of the history of Polish Jews. Opened in 2013, it is a journey of 1,000 years of Polish-Jewish survival, from the arrival of traveling merchants during medieval times to current exhibits such as *Presence/Absence/Traces: Contemporary Artists on Jewish Warsaw*, a collective of 13 artist residencies. The museum's core exhibit spans a millennium, but its harrowing account of World War II captures the magnitude of Warsaw's ghetto (which at one point held nearly 400,000 Jews) as well as personal accounts that portray a crushing oppression:

"We are imprisoned within double walls: a wall of brick for our bodies, and a wall of silence for our spirits."

— Chaim A. Kaplan, June 25, 1942, Scroll of Agony





POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

A nearby towering monument commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 in which a band of resistance fighters attempted to deflect deportation. Ultimately defeated, the resistance held the Germans at bay for nearly a month and is said to be the largest Jewish uprising in German-occupied Europe. Designed by Natan Rapaport, the memorial is constructed of Swedish marble originally ordered by Adolf Hitler for a monument glorifying the Third Reich, a solemn reminder of Warsaw's battle scars.

While much of Warsaw pays homage to its role in World War II, it is also a city of music, culture, and nightlife. It is the home of Chopin, and music plays an integral role in the city's offerings, from the intimate Chopin salon to the Teatr Wielki, one of Europe's grandest theaters. Nearly destroyed during the uprising, it took 20 years to restore.

Warsaw's gay-friendly nightlife has an underground, spirited vibe. I make my way up six floors of a dilapidated building to Blok, one of the latest clubs to enter the scene. Graffiti art, craft cocktails and local beer provide a backdrop for an international crowd. Glam Club is a short walk away and packed with teens and 20-somethings, bumping and grinding in every direction (surprisingly, nobody is drinking Polish vodka – beer seems to be the drink of choice). My evening climaxes at Toro, a late-night dance club, amid model bartenders. As an uninhibited sexual energy wafts through the air, I wonder what these Generation

Zs might know about the hallowed ground on which they stand or the equality battles being fought among and around them.

Writer and philosopher George Santayana famously wrote, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I have found during my time in Poland that *experiencing* the past has been infinitely more powerful. There is no way I could hear the gravel underfoot at Auschwitz, see Warsaw's majestic buildings that have stood the test of time, or smell the sweet flowers at Wroclaw's bustling open-air market and not have a greater sense of humankind's fragility.

Our nation is on the precipice of one of the most important presidential elections of our generation. More than 4.8 million Syrian refugees are seeking aid. And there are still 75 countries with criminal laws against the LGBT community. But in lieu of waking each day with a sense of gloom, my experiences throughout Poland have imparted a sense of hope. In spite of our darkest hour, there will always be light. There will always be a chance to heal. And there will always be an opportunity for change. **E**

Matthew Wexler is EDGE Media Network's national style and travel editor. Follow him on social media at @roodeloo.

Resource Guide

RAIL EUROPE

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OASIS

ODALYS NANIN CREATES SPACE FOR LATINA THEATER IN MACHA

 WINNIE McCROY

PLAYWRIGHT AND ACTOR Odalys Nanin was about to open her play *Skin of Honey* in 2006, when Thad Taylor, founder of the world-famous Globe Playhouse in West Hollywood, passed away. With the fate of the landmark theater in jeopardy, Nanin scrambled to gather the funds to purchase and preserve the theater. After years of working to restore the space, Nanin opened it as the MACHA (Mujeres Advancing Culture, History and Art) Theatre. It now serves as California's epicenter of Latina LGBT theater.

"I had always wanted to have my own space, so I put my wish out into the universe, and then this opened up," said Nanin. "A lot of people wanted to turn the Globe into a furniture store or a parking lot, but I really fought for it to remain a theater, not only because of its long history, but because it was such a good location for this space. It really became my passion."



Beginning in 2007, Nanin worked on remodeling the space, rescuing some 1942 vintage theater seats headed for scrap metal, creating a new lobby, renovating the backstage area, adding insulation, creating Garbo's VIP Screening Room with a red carpet, adding a marquis and starting a cabaret and comedy night. She applied for a beer and wine license; several years later, she received it, and created Machine Wine Bar/Café.

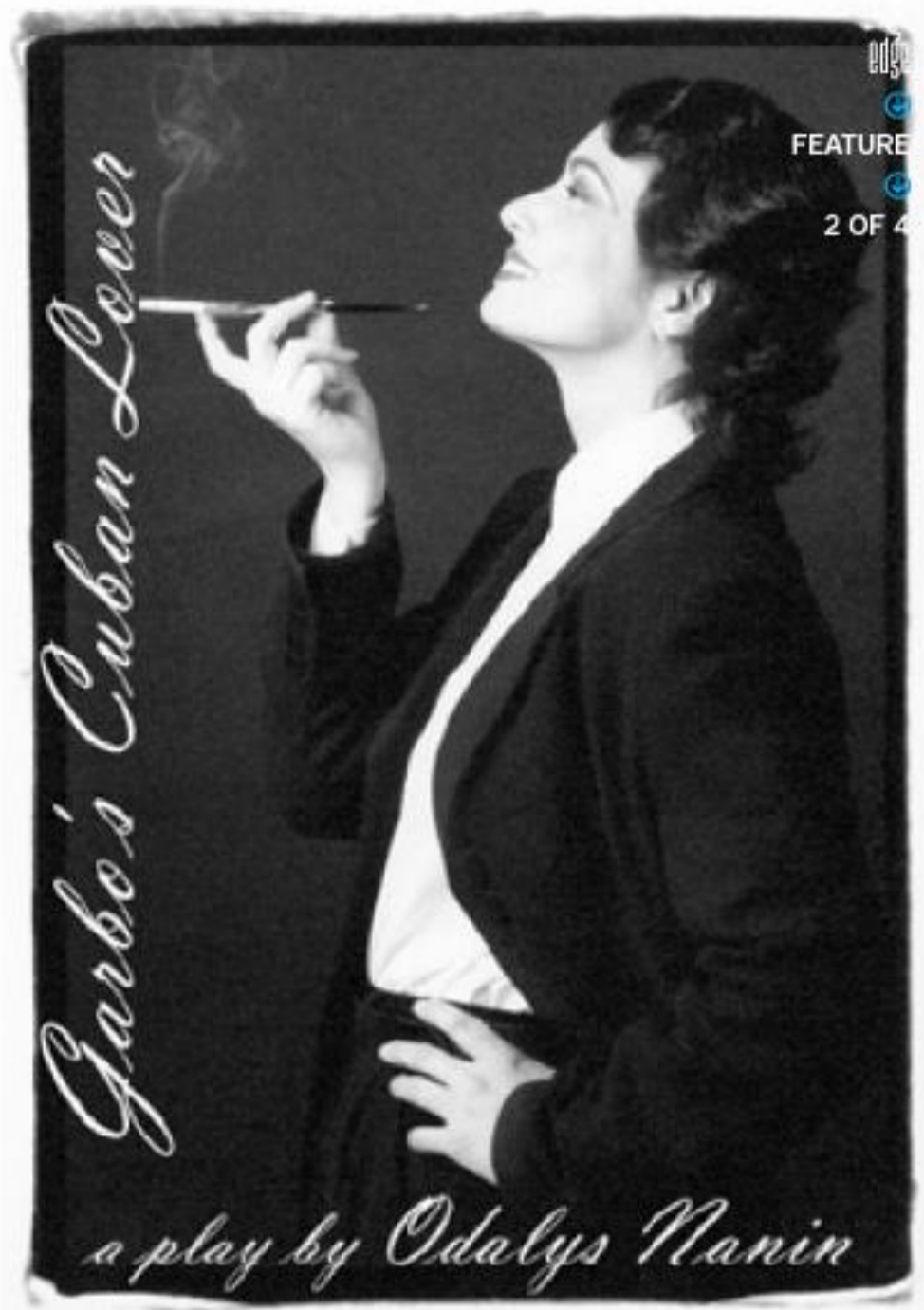
"Now everyone feels very much at home, and I want people to feel that way – like they are coming home," said Nanin. "The most recent thing I've done is to bring Club Hugo's into MACHA Theatre; you can order appetizers from the restaurant, and we'll bring them over for you to eat right in the lobby!"

As an artist, Nanin's bona fides are solid: she has written 10 plays, two of which – *Garbo's Secret Lover* and *Marilyn: My Secret* – garnered back-to-back LA Weekly's Pick of the Week; written and produced two short films; and received three Drama-Logue Awards, the Maverick Award, and the Pat Parker Arts Award.

"When I get awards like these, it makes it all mean something," she said. "Because I'm not just doing it for me; it's to share it with the public, my audience. I'm honored when anyone takes hours of their time to come see my play."

Nanin recently starred with AJ Cook and Shemar Moore in *Criminal Minds*, was named one of *Out* magazine's 100 in 2007, and is a role model in theater for young girls. And while having her own theater has given her a place to produce her own works, it has also afforded other playwrights with the same opportunity.

"The reason I formed MACHA Theatre was that there were no venues for Latina theater, period. Plays about women remained



in the shadows," said Nanin. "So being named on the *Out* 100 List was amazing, because that was the year I renovated this entire place and opened *Skin of Honey*."

Her plays deal with stories of powerful women, including Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland, as well as the stories of those living in the shadows, like the romance between 17th-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and Countess Maria Luisa de Paredes, Vicereine of Mexico.

Nanin said that some of the women she wrote about were very powerful but no one knew about them – like *The Lieutenant Nun*, the story of Catalina de Erauso. "She was a cloistered nun who escaped and became a soldier, and then a lieutenant in Peru," Nanin explained. "She fought valiantly and at the end confessed she was a woman. But she got a pension from the King of Spain and a blessing from the pope that allowed her to keep



VIDEO:
ODALYS NANIN ACTING REEL



wearing men's garb, as it helped her preserve her virginity."

"These are women who were survivors, fighters who each differently stood up to something," said Nanin. "I wrote *Marilyn: My Secret* because I never believed she committed suicide. I wanted to write a cabaret show about her, but in my research I discovered so much that it became a play. I believe her coach Natasha Lytess was her lover of six years, and a very important person in her life and career; I also feel like she really fell in love with Bobby Kennedy. And Judy Garland was an icon above and beyond; she has always pulled me in."

Currently, Nanin is looking into the life of Frida Kahlo for the play *Frida: Stroke of Passion*. As there's no dearth of information about the artist's life, Nanin's play looks at the final two weeks of Kahlo's life, saying, "I do believe Kahlo committed suicide, or somehow caused her own death, although they say it was from pneumonia. To me, it's most important to reveal something mystifying, or something no one else has written about. In doing so, I dis-

"The reason I formed MACHA Theatre was that there were no venues for Latina theater, **period.** Plays about women remained in the shadows."

cover the soul of the character and what they are going through."

Nanin has currently written 10 plays, which she calls "all very special to me, like my babies." She would love to see them restaged in other cities, saying, "It's my mission now to share these stories and characters."

Now it looks like those dreams may be coming to fruition. The City of West Hollywood recently gave Nanin a small grant to bring her play *Skin of Honey* back to the stage. A Miami theater is looking to mount a production of *Garbo's Cuban Lover*. And the Cuban-



born Nanin was recently invited to participate in a Caribbean theater panel in Cuba this May, with other Los Angeles artists.

"I was born in Cuba and left because my dad was given political asylum," said Nanin. "Although I grew up here and consider myself American, to go visit Cuba is an amazing eye-opener for me. I've always wanted to go back as an artist, so I'm very excited this is going to happen."

Nanin was also interviewed by Career Girls as a role model in theater for young girls, saying, "I thought, what a great thing to have when you're 10 years old, to see someone who's done it! When you're that young, your whole life is in front of you, and sometimes you don't know where to go with it. I think it does help to see the trajectory of someone who did it, and I was very honored to be asked. Hopefully, we'll have a new generation of girls in the theater."

And when they're ready to produce those plays, MACHA Theatre will be there to provide the stage. In the meantime, Nanin will keep the space thriving, creating screening festivals, musicals, plays, workshops, cabarets and red carpet events for West Hollywood's thriving LGBT community. **0**

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Charles Busch Gets Ready to Kiss Asp

AFTER BRIEFLY TOYING WITH RETIREMENT, THE DOYENNE OF DOWNTOWN RETURNS IN A SELF-TITLED HISTORICAL COMEDY

 BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Charles Busch has been the Lady in the Question, a not-so-Divine Sister, a Vampire Lesbian of Sodom and even a She-Bitch of Byzantium. But the Queen of the Nile? Really?

Yep, this peerless comic genius, as comfortable in a red wig and high heels as he is in male trousers (well, maybe more so in the former) is taking a chance on making an asp of himself by taking on the title role in his newest work, *Charles Busch's Cleopatra*, now playing a strictly limited 24-performance engagement at the East Village institution Theater for the New City.



“The template I’m using here is the 1934 film adaptation starring Claudette Colbert. We’re telling this whole story in 70 minutes.”



So is this a lifelong dream finally fulfilled? “When I was 8 years old, the film *Cleopatra* with Elizabeth Taylor came out, and I was the kid who was reading movie magazines at a young age, so I become obsessed with her,” says Busch. “I was actually taking some sort of drawing classes, and I just kept drawing pictures of her eye make-up. The teacher was very disconcerted; I think she kept trying to convince herself I was just interested in history.”

So should we all be prepared for a three-hour-plus epic snoozefest crammed into a 99-seat off-Broadway theater? No worries there. “The template I’m using here is the 1934 film adaptation starring Claudette Colbert. We’re telling this whole story in 70 minutes. I love that movie because it was all very art deco, and she plays a

lot of it with that naughty socialite attitude she became famous for,” he says. “I’m really playing her more part Barbara Stanwyck, part Jean Harlow, and part Greta Garbo.”

But what about La Taylor? “I can’t get through that movie as an adult,” Busch admits. “I’ve tried, but it is so long. However, I couldn’t help myself – I do steal a couple of her line readings.”

Cleopatra is directed by Busch’s frequent collaborator, Carl Andress, and the star wouldn’t have it any other way. “We’ve done so many plays together, I think he may know me better than anyone in the whole world. In fact, the first thing we do is that we read all the roles ourselves so he knows exactly how I want it said, and after that, he’s in my head,” says Busch. “But I love that he’s not afraid of me, and that he lets me talk to the other actors directly when I want. But as I stress to everyone, Carl really is the director – he is the boss. And that’s important because this is the kind of situation where we move quickly. We only rehearse two weeks, and the whole play is blocked in three days. There’s no time for game playing or hand holding.”

That’s one reason Busch often works on shows like this with old friends, which in this case include the actors Ashley Aus-

“We only rehearse two weeks, and the whole play is blocked in three days. There’s no time for game playing or hand holding.”



Photo Credit: David Rodgers
(L to R) Joe Zaso, Charles Busch

tin Morris, Jennifer Van Dyck, Jen Cody and childhood friend Andy Halliday. “It’s as much a social event as a play, so I always like having fun people around to work with and hang out with for a month,” he notes. Still, much to his chagrin there was no suitable role for his longtime muse and collaborator, the one and only Julie Halston. “It’s a pretty male-dominated show,” he says. “I mean, I had to beef up the women’s parts somehow, so I made up a lesbian subplot for Jen and Ashley. And Jennifer, who can do both extremes of gender equally well, is playing both Octavian and Octavia.”

Still, he seems most excited about playing opposite cast members who are the newest members of the extended Busch family. “I always wanted to work with Tony Sheldon, but it was a dilemma at first. After all, Julius Caesar gets assassinated pretty early on, so I think Tony is now the first person to play both Caesar and his wife Calpurnia,”

he says. “And Joe Zaso, who plays Marc Antony, is my personal discovery. About 20 years ago I saw him in a Long Island production of my play *Red Scare on Sunset* and was blown away. He’s very charismatic, and he is truly a terrific leading man for this actress of a certain age.”

Admittedly, some of Busch’s fans were afraid they had lost their last opportunity to see him in a new play – or any play. “I know, last year I made some noises about retiring from theater, but it didn’t last very long,” he admits. “And the truth is, I don’t know how many more plays I will be doing. But it’s good to do something like this just for the joy of making theater. And it’s my kind of thing: it’s a bawdy romp. Let’s just say, I wouldn’t invite Ted Cruz. And while I have a funny part, the best thing for me is to be surrounded by these great clowns. I kind of stand around and everyone talks fast around me.”

Cleopatra is also, as it happens, a change of pace from what Busch has focused on for the past three years: a serious career in cabaret. “I actually took



Photo Credit: David Rodgers
(L to R) Ashley Austin Morris, Jennifer Cody, Charles Busch, Tony Sheldon, Lawrence Bullock, Andy Halliday

singing lessons for the first time in my life," admits Busch. "I discovered it was better not to be completely ignorant. I found my voice teacher, John Tedeschi, on Facebook, and he was terrific. He gave me the tools I needed."

The cabaret show, called *The Lady with the Mic*, is a collaboration with the porn model turned musician Tom Judson, and was seen in February as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series. It's a salute to some of Busch's favorite women, including Elaine Stritch, Polly Bergen and Joan Rivers.

"I knew all the woman I talk about in different degrees of intimacy," Busch said. "I do tend to gravitate to women over 80. Yes, I get big crushes on older women. Of course, as I get older, they get older – now if they're over 90, I automatically love them. They won't let me into the old actor's home. Honestly, my mother died when I was a child, and

I think so many of my professional choices have been made because I want to please all these women in my life."

And would they have been pleased? "We worked so hard for six months leading up to Lincoln Center. It was a very elaborate show, almost like a book musical, going from anecdote to song to song. We were so careful: we tried each song in a different city, so we were really familiar with each song before we were sure we were using it. We put the show together in Madison, Wisconsin, about three weeks before we came to New York, then we played Helsinki Hudson upstate about two weeks before, where we added the band," he says. "So I really was prepared when we got to the Appel Room, and I was so glad not to screw it up with nerves and insecurity. It was a wonderful evening. I'll do it again in a few months, and I would consider doing a long run in New York. It could be in a club; it could be in a theater. There are so many different ways of presenting it."

So is Cleopatra (which admittedly could transfer to a commercial run) his final turn at gender-bending? "I don't know," says Busch. "Playing Marie Antoinette has always been on my bucket list, but I am not sure I can write a raucous comedy about her." **E**

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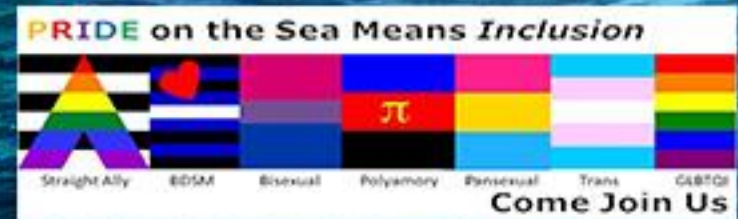


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“It’s so Baltimore. It will be the only monument in the world to dog shit,” says Steve Yeager, author and documentarian, whose film *Divine Trash* tracks the early work of native sons John Waters and Harris Glenn Milstead, Waters’ star and muse better known as Divine.

The memorial to the cult icon will be located on Tyson Street, in the historic Read Street area of the city, and will feature a detailed close-up of the star and a quote from Waters – “It was a magic day in our happy young lives” – framed by authentic Baltimore Beaver Dam marble.





"It's so Baltimore. It will be the only monument in the world to dog shit." —**Steve Yeager**

And, of course, in a testament to this unique performer's commitment to Waters' vision, it will include a small piece of beautifully crafted poop, which commemorates the stomach-turning street snack consumed by Divine over four decades ago at the end of Waters' breakout film *Pink Flamingos*. The monument will be mounted on the side of the row house of designer-teacher Michael Pugh, very close to the site where the small dog and large drag artist did their deeds.

With approval from the city (more on that later), the initiative's organizers have launched a Kickstarter campaign along with other fundraising events to cover the monument's estimated \$70,000 price tag.

REEFER MADNESS ... OR GENIUS?

Waters admits that *Pink Flamingos* was written and filmed "under the influence" of weed, and this monument got its start under similar circumstances.

"I have a little shop called Hampden Junque. It's in a neighborhood that's a small version of Brooklyn's Williamsburg," says monument project organizer Michal Makarovich, a Baltimore native and booster.

"Many times throughout the years people have come into the shop asking, 'Where did Divine eat doggie do at the end of *Pink Flamingos*?' " While

many assumed it was near his store, the actual location was several blocks away.

He continues: "One night my friend Alex Fox and I were drinking wine and getting stoned when the idea came to us." Still inspired by their concept in the cold light of day, they decided to pursue it. And the more they talked, the more other friends and neighbors wanted to get involved.

However, they needed an artist to realize their vision.

A DOSE OF COURAGE

"Then I was at this party, and there was this nice guy with a shaved head named David Hess," Makarovich says. "Turns out he's one of the major sculptors of our region. So when I came home, I had the boldness to get on the computer and send David a message saying: 'Why don't you do something shameful for a change?' In the morning he said, 'I'd love to.' "

As the concept developed and expanded, Hess brought in a frequent collaborator, sculptor Sebastian Mar torana.

SPANNING THE AGES

Like all great art, Waters and Divine's worldwide appeal spans generations, demonstrated by the diversity of fans collaborating on this project, which include Iranian-born writer Parisa Saran, website developer James Stephenson, and 28-year-old Alex Fox, co-owner of Church & Company, a Hampden performance venue. They're all assisting with fundraising.

Born the year Divine died (at age 43), what inspired Fox's love for the performer and his adopted city? His "come to Jesus" moment took place at 16. "I grew up outside of Cleveland. We watched *Pink Flamingos* in my friend's basement. We had to hide it from her parents, who were Jehovah's Witnesses," he remembers.

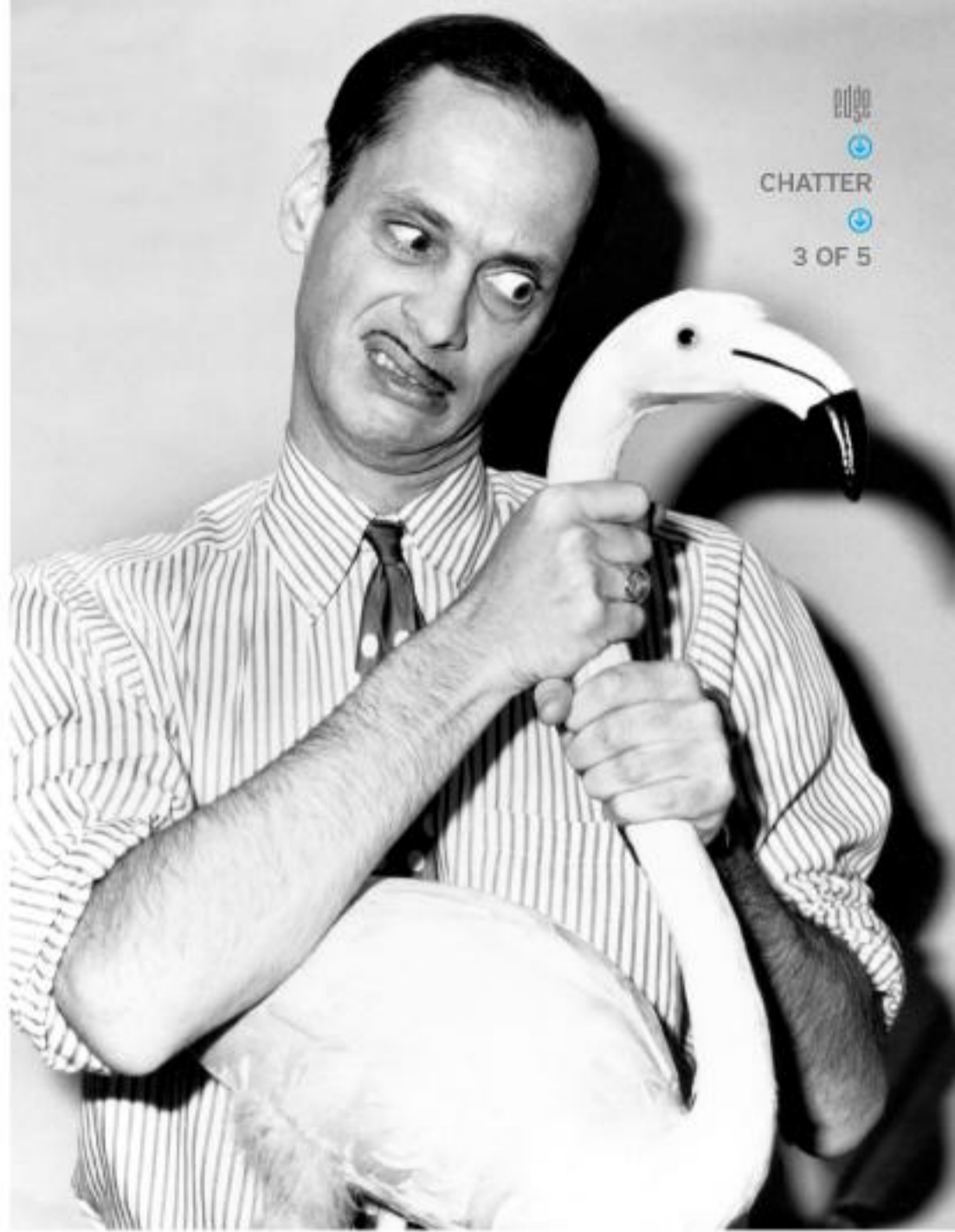
"Later I came to here for school and I stayed. I'm deeply in love with Baltimore." Working to fund this monument will be his way of giving back to his adopted city. He's organizing fundraising events – including a "gala" at notorious dive bar Leon's – and meeting with business leaders and neighborhood organizations to spread the word.

"We've gotten a lot of press, but people don't know about it still," says Fox. "The street it will be on was a lively commercial district, and everyone we've spoken to with businesses in the neighborhood is excited because it will bring people to the neighborhood."

"It's all been positive."

A VERY LONG PAUSE

Makarovich agrees: community support has been almost universal. He recounts



the group's experience presenting their initial idea to the city.

"Five of us went downtown and gave our pitch on the 10th floor of a big office building. We spoke for a few minutes, and there was awkward silence." At this meeting of the Public Art Commission, elegant and imposing commissioner Elissa Blount-Moorhead responded:

"I am appalled [long pause] ... that no one thought of this before.

Of course this should be here."

Makarovich continues: "Everyone approved enthusiastically. We were a bit surprised because at that point we didn't even have a drawing."

GROWING UP WITH THE POPE OF TRASH

It's an ingenuous idea, and one that's generated a lot of press. But – other than as a marker for tourists – why build a monument to Divine? Waters' well-docu-



“Divine was my Elizabeth Taylor. I thought of him as a great character actor.”

—John Waters

mented answer is simple: “Divine was my Elizabeth Taylor. I thought of him as a great character actor.”

Yeager provides more in-depth answers. A long-time friend of Waters, Yeager knew the filmmaker when they were both delinquent teens in Charm City trying to buy weed in the city’s tiny “beatnik” neighborhood.

“Our Greenwich Village was about two and a half blocks. It had a Chinese restaurant, a bookstore, a leather store and a chess store, and a coffeehouse, where John and I would go to buy grass,” Yeager remembers.

The two also shared a love of cinema, especially the burgeoning underground movie industry, and were involved with a film co-op first in New York then back in Baltimore. “We’d show our films at peoples’ houses. There weren’t too many people making [independent] films in the late ‘60s. At the end of the co-op, there were only three of us left,” he says.

A DOCUMENTARY TWO DECADES IN THE MAKING

In the early 1970s, Yeager was working for a local news station and convinced his bosses to let him create a series of 30-minute films on local artists.

“Really it was just an excuse to do a piece on John,” admits the filmmaker, who spent more than six hours filming his friend during the making of *Pink Flamingos*, Waters’ first film shot in color.

Yeager’s piece ran, but he still had a lot of film remaining, much of which spent two decades in a refrigerator. His footage includes thoughtful interviews with Waters and offers insights into the director’s process, which, for many casual fans, might be surprising. His films were carefully scripted, scenes patiently rehearsed, and unlike other low-budget filmmakers, the King of Filth often demanded multiple takes — more reminiscent of Josef von Sternberg than Roger Corman.

Divine Trash, which Yeager completed in 1998, features interviews with Divine, makeup artist Van Smith, performer Mink Stole and others from Waters’ 1960s/1970s circle — as well as Waters’ parents and Divine’s mother. Smith created Divine’s signature “blonde bouffant with extreme eyebrows” look, a mad fusion of ‘50s bombshell Jayne Mansfield and Clarabell the Clown from *The Howdy Doody Show*, a childhood

"I am appalled [long pause] ... that no one thought of this before. Of course this should be here."

—**Baltimore Arts Council
Commissioner Elissa
Blount-Moorhead**

obsession of Waters'. The performer's hairline was shaved to make room for the eyebrows.

FOUNDING FATHERS – ROLLING OVER IN THEIR GRAVES?

Sculptor Sebastian Martorana sees this project as part of an overall effort to revive Baltimore.

"I came on board when David and Michal decided to make this more than a single bronze plaque. David and I have known each other for a number of years; we've worked on various things together. I've done a lot of work that deals with memory and memorials," says the sculptor, who frequently works with recycled material, including marble from Baltimore's now-exhausted Beaver Dam quarry.

"Everything you see in the image of the monument on the website would be made of marble specific to this area – salvaged material from row houses in the city, all made of marble from a nearby quar-

ry that's no longer producing," he says. "Those stoops are synonymous with Baltimore. I'm trying to turn that stone into something beautiful again."

"We have a tradition of creating these public monuments, and there were lots of stone sculptures all over the city, including the country's first Washington Monument," says Martorana.

"Baltimore *is* a monument city." 



Tap here to learn more about the Divine Monument initiative, get involved, donate or otherwise show support.
divinemonument.com



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Chloë

BY DROEGE  ROBERT NESTI

HOW A GAY IMPROV ACTOR TURNED A FASHION ICON INTO HIS SPIRIT ANIMAL

"Have you watched Chloë?" a close friend asked me a few years back.

"As in Daphnis and ... , or as in Sevigny?" I asked.

"The latter, and, well, sort of," he replied cryptically. "I'll send you a link."

Intrigued, I followed it to discover Drew Droege's Internet meme, in which the comic actor offers his sublimely funny take on the actress. In a series of smartly produced videos, Droege plays a deadpan Chloë – a fashionista who muses on contemporary style and culture with droll sangfroid and impeccable knowing.





VIDEO:
Chloe "Toast"

"Good evening, America," she intones at the start of each episode. "It has recently come to my attention ..." – at which time she states her topic, one that she not so much mispronounces as gives her own pronunciation. (*Barbeque* become "bar-be-qué;" exercise, "ex-cer-seé;" even a monosyllabic word like *toast* gets Chloë into "to-easte.") She then expounds with a series of non sequiturs that are the equivalent of thumbing through the latest issue of *Paper* magazine. She name drops people, places and things, and in doing so validates their and her own supreme hipness. One minute she's at a gluten-free vegan brunch with Charlotte Rampling, Gaby Hoffman and DJ Frankie Knuckles, the next she's seated with her good friend Pippa Middleton after a long engagement at the world premiere of *Wrath of the Titans* sponsored by Sunkist, Fangoria and Hammacher Schlemmer.

Droege has been doing Chloë since 2002 and has dozens of videos under his belt. The character, though, is just one facet of this LA-based performer's career. He's been called the hardest-working gay man in Hollywood – a moniker he dismissed recently. "Right now, it's 11 a.m., and I'm just rolling out of bed to walk down the street to catch a movie, so I'm not always the most driven man in town. But I think I just

prefer to be busy. I love what I do, and I'm better at my job when I don't have too much downtime or space to over think what I'm doing."

Recently Droege can be seen in the dark indie comedy *You're Killing Me* (that can be watched on DVD or VOD), which asks: Is it possible to have a meaningful relationship with a serial killer? The film gave the actor the opportunity to work with his collaborator on his Chloë videos, writer and director Jim Hensen and his close friend, Jeffery Self. "Getting to make that movie with some of my best friends was a complete dream. Jim and Jeffery wrote it for all of us – they know our voices so well." He recalled working on a particularly dark scene with his cast members when "we broke into hysterical laughter – our makeup was running down our faces, and I thought I was going to vomit I was laughing so hard. And we were doing a horrifically dark scene. It just doesn't get better than that. And the movie is so good, I am beyond proud of them."

Droege grew up in the Carolinas – both North and South – where he was fortunately insulated from Bible Belt attitudes by his nurturing family. "Coming out was easy because everyone just knew," he recalls. "I never really sat everyone down and had 'the talk' but wish that I had. I didn't know for sure until I was 22, and at that point, I felt so beyond doing that. So I understand anyone's struggles with coming out, and I also celebrate the 11-year-olds who are screaming, 'Mama, I'm queer!'"

“I just saw Chloë Sevigny in the mirror. Then I read an interview with her in which she dropped delightfully obscure references as if we all were on her page, and I fell in love.”



Even in high school Droege turned heads. “I was really involved in the community theater and was the first high-schooler to direct one of their shows, so the local paper called me ‘Lincolnton’s Orson Welles’!! But that might be because I was caught drinking an entire Big Gulp of ruby red vodka at our football game. And I was involved in a crazy stupid pot scandal my senior year. So I was basically a nightmare. I made a lot of mistakes – public mistakes. I had a great group of high-school friends and a lovely hilarious family, but I also had a *Time Out New York* subscription that showed my 17-year-old ass everything I was missing on a weekly basis, so I had to get out.”

Getting out took him to Los Angeles in 1999, where he began to study comedy at the Groundlings, the improv comedy troupe that has produced such talents as Will Ferrell, Kathy Griffin, Kristen Wiig and Will Forte. For Droege it was serendipitous. “I saw that movie *Go* in college and fell in love with this girl who had the tiniest part. She just made everything out of a few lines. I screamed, ‘That’s what I want to be able to do!’ A few months later, I moved to LA and went to the Groundlings. I saw pictures in the lobby of

so many heroes – Phil Hartman, Lisa Kudrow, Jennifer Coolidge – and in the show that night was the girl from *Go*. Her name was Melissa McCarthy, and I was hooked.”

At first he was terrified at taking part in improv comedy; today he’s part of the Groundlings’ faculty. “I love it. Teaching improv is really about getting people to relax and listen and trust themselves and each other – all of this is what actually makes someone funny. The Groundlings have such a useful technique that anyone can learn. And it has made me a better performer, because I’ve really had to figure out how and why things work or don’t. And I’m still learning.”

It was in 2002 when Droege discovered Chloë. He was working out characters by trying on wigs at a LA club. “That’s what adults with problems do: put on wigs and scream,” he said in a 2002 performance at a LA club in which he explained the genesis of Chloë. He was working on a character of a 13-year-old sexually aggressive teenage girl (that was something of a sociopath) when he put on a blonde wig. “And I just saw Chloë Sevigny in the mirror. Then I read an interview with her in which she dropped delightfully obscure references as if we all were on her page, and I fell in love. I put her up in a gay sketch

show I was doing, and it *bombed* so horribly. Five minutes of funereal silence.”

That it was a disaster puts it mildly. “I just kept going and kept going. My mouth felt like a Cabbage Patch Doll’s asshole – dry and pointless,” he recalled in 2002. “I don’t know why I begged to do it another time, because it was the worst performance experience of my life, and I wanted to do it all over again.”

It got better. “The following night it went really well. It was like that until I started doing videos: I never knew if people would get it or not – and they either got it, or they really truly violently did not,” he explained recently to EDGE.

Droege realized that the Sevigny he read about represented a world with which he was fascinated. “I have always been obsessed with that world, that downtown NY, avant-trash sort of world. Full of homeless snobs. Trust fund disco shits. Chloë Sevigny represented all of that and that world.”

Then he added, “Chloë Sevigny was and still is way cooler than I am, and way cooler than all of you are too.”

In fact, his Chloë is the avatar of all things cool. “When things suddenly come to Chloë’s attention, they instantly become valid and important. And she name drops nouvelle cuisine and haute couture and hip-hop culture and everything. She celebrates herself for being in the know.”

After playing Chloë for a few years, Droege found himself at a Christmas party with the real Chloë, an event he recalled in a 2011 Daily Beast piece at which a friend dragged him across the room to meet her. “We kind of just stared at each other for



a while, and I said, ‘I hope you know how much I love you. Thanks for being you: you’re awesome.’ Then she gave me a big hug and made my Chloë face at me. That bitch has seen my videos! She’s doing me! Then we wildly laughed and hugged again and talked about vodka. She was the definition of cool, wearing a retro denim jacket over a leather mini-dress, smoking a Merit Ultra Light, with unwashed hair and a homeless boy date,” he told the Daily Beast.


“She was really sweet and down to earth,” he added more recently. “Nothing like my character. But it was really awkward for both of us – I think it’s impossible for her to get what I’m doing, and I don’t want to ever go after the real Chloë Sevigny. I often get texts from people telling me where she is, as if I would rush over to her and scream, ‘Good evening, America’ at her! I once got asked to ambush her on a red carpet at one of her premieres. *Why* would I ever do that? I don’t want to invade her life any more than I already have. And I prefer my Chloë to be my alternate universe version of the real thing.”

Droege was the recipient of the 2010 Outfest’s Special Programming Award for Emerging Talent for his work in indie gay film. Does he think things have



changed for out actors in Hollywood since then? “The ceiling is cracking in a beautiful way – actors are coming out, and no one is batting an eye, which is huge. I also firmly believe that the best actor should get the job, regardless of sexuality or gender or anything. But we have to work within our community to support each other. I think it’s only gay people who label gay actors as ‘gay actors,’ and that does hold gay actors back a bit. I’m a huge advocate for Outfest – it’s important for me to know our history and see our stories and share them with friends. And I see us rushing toward the mainstream to change it, not to just be accepted within it.”

What does he have in the offing? “I just shot Season 3 of Logo’s *Cocktails and Classics*, which is such a fun gig, watching movies and drinking with Michael Urie. Nothing better. I’m going to be in an upcoming episode of *Bob’s Burgers*, plus new shows *Bajillion Dollar Properties* and *The Crossroads of History*. I also have small parts in a hilarious new indie film, *The 4th*, which just premiered at Sundance, as well as a thriller, *The Circle*, directed by James Ponsoldt, starring Emma Watson and Tom Hanks.”

With so much to do, does Droege have a social life? “I have a great bunch of friends. We see each other when we can. Last weekend, we randomly got wasted together for the first time in forever, and it was super necessary. I want a relationship, so hopefully I can work toward that at some point. But right now, I’m just trying to have fun and enjoy all of it and not freak out. I think that’s why we’re here, right?” 

“I love it. Teaching improv is really about getting people to relax and listen and trust themselves and each other.”

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DREAMING BIG

The trio who make up the Swedish dream-pop band Postiljonen quietly released their second album *Reverie* in February. Though a few months old, the stunning record is ready to soundtrack your spring.



JASON ST AMAND

FOR DECADES, SWEDISH MUSICIANS have Trojan Hosed their way into American pop. Reaching as far back as the '70s, when ABBA ruled the airwaves, Swedish pop artists/producers/songwriters played an important role in shaping the music landscape, even affecting today's biggest hits.

In John Seabrook's 2015 book *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*, the *New Yorker* journalist explores pop music from all angles, including the contributions of artists from the Scandinavian country. Music is engrained into Swedish citizens' minds at a young age. According to a 2014 Mic.com article, "As *Pacific Standard* reported earlier this year, the Swedish government has offered high-quality music education for nearly all of its citizens in subsidized after-school programs since the 1940s."





Seabrook writes that the Swedish pop boom really took form with Ace of Base's smash '92 hit "The Sign," which, at the time, was a unique blend of Top 40, Europop and R&B – a genre the band felt free to play with since Swedes don't have the same type of racial connection as most Americans. Seabrook notes that Swedish songwriters and producers are less concerned about the meanings and metaphors built into lyrics, allowing them to be more adventurously weird when crafting exciting pop music. Seabrook also points to one of the most important figures in Swedish-American pop: Denniz PoP, a Swedish DJ and producer who worked on "The Sign" along with early singles for Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys and N*Sync.

A few years after co-founding the record studio Cheiron Studios in Stockholm, Denniz PoP died of stomach cancer in 1998 at the age of 35. However, the producer's protégé, Martin Sandberg, better known today as Max Martin, reformed the company, calling it the Location and going on to change modern pop music.

The Swedes not only molded radio-friendly jams but also directly affected indie music. While Martin made chart-topping bangers for Spears, Kelly Clarkson, Katy Perry and more recently Taylor

“Seabrook notes that Swedish songwriters and producers are less concerned about the meanings and metaphors built into lyrics, allowing them to be more adventurously weird when crafting exciting pop music.”

Swift and the Weeknd, a handful of underground acts from Sweden shook music that mostly thrived online. The record label Sincerely Yours, which housed acts like the Tough Alliance, Air France and jj, along with folk singers Jens Lekman, El Perro del Mar and Taken by Trees, were just some of the Swedish acts who took over indie rock in the early '00s.

It's these two camps – the expensive, lush sounds that Martin currently creates for radio and the electronic-folk blend that dominated the MP3 Blog Age – that are the bedrock for Postiljonen's music.

Postiljonen, which formed in 2011 and is currently based in Stockholm, comprise three members: singer Mia Bøe and bandmates Joel Nostrum Holm and Daniel Sjörs. With two albums under their belt, the trio has carved out a spectacularly grand sound pulling from influences from their native land. On their debut album, *Skyer*, Postiljonen established a widescreen stadium sound akin to Max Martin and fellow Swedish hitmakers, like Shellback, Klas Åhlund, Avicii, RedOne and the Cardigans' Peter Svensson, all of whom crafted the biggest hits in modern Top 40.

On *Skyer*, the group booms with electro soundscapes that feel like the soundtrack to your dreams. The record peaks with highs like "We Raise Our Hearts," an electro-dance jam that plays with disco touchstones and melancholy beats, and "Plastic Panorama" is a Balearic-kissed, nostalgic synth-laden daydream, which sounds like a modernized Tough Alliance song. But what makes Postiljonen truly unique is that they balance out their hazy synthesized music with a natural layer of folk music, using acoustic guitar, humming and handclaps that give their records an organic laidback flavor.



The band carries over the same combination of sounds on their sophomore effort, *Reverie*, released in February. Postiljonen doubles down on their wistful and cinematic tunes, which beautifully highlight a delicate sense of intimacy, as if the 11 songs on the LP were birthed from the serene Swedish countryside. Though the members of Postiljonen rarely give (English) interviews, a quote from Swedish producer Åhlund sums up the band.

"Swedes are very musical, and they love to write songs," he told the *New York Times* last October. "Songwriting was just a thing you did on your own when you were watching the cows, a kind of meditation. You didn't focus as much on your ability as a performer as you did on the structure and craft of the songs. Which is really not the case in the U.S., where your charm and your voice and your powers as a performer come immediately into play."



VIDEO:
Postiljonen - "We Raise Our Hearts"

On *Reverie*, Bøe's ethereal vocals are covered in reverb, a common dream-pop trope, and while her voice isn't front and center on most songs, her haunting sound is the record's backbone. Her voice is another instrument that Postiljonen plays with, giving their music an extra layer of dreaminess. While the band's lyrics don't shine through often, there are moments on *Reverie* where your ear clicks with what Bøe is singing. On single "Wait" Bøe heartwarmingly chants the chorus: "If I give my heart away / You will only start a fire." On "Go!," Bøe sings, "And if you feel

like the sky walk land from burning / Remember our souls are burning too / Rather our feet won't stop from turning / We know that it changes you."

Opening track "The Open Road" builds into a huge explosion that is similar to the epic work of French band M83, an act with whom Postiljonen is often compared. "Go!" is also the most daring track on *Reverie*, finding the band ditching their Scandinavian musical roots for a four-on-the-floor beat infused with intense house music. The song works and pumps a burst of energy into the otherwise chilled-out, glistening LP.

Though it will not be a chart-topper, and many music websites won't cover Postiljonen, the band's second album fits perfectly in the legacy of Swedish musicians. *Reverie* is a bright, crisp and balanced record that offers the addictive pop optimism of mega bangers anchored by interesting indie pop flourishes – Postiljonen combining the best of both worlds. **8**

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