

THEATER

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GAYFEST NYC

Written by Michael Portantiere

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May 14-June 15, 2008

The TBG Arts Center
312 West 36th Street
gayfestnyc.com

Thirty or more years ago, during the decade immediately following the birth of the modern gay liberation movement, the need for a festival of plays with gay subject matter would have been obvious. But today, when it sometimes seems that half of all musicals and plays produced on or off Broadway have some sort of gay content, what's the rationale behind **GAYFEST NYC**?

According to the festival's co-producers, Bruce Robert Harris and Jack W. Batman, the primary goal of the endeavor is to provide a forum for new voices. This year's main stage shows are *Edward the King*, by David Brendan Hopes, directed by Sidney J. Burgoyne; *Spill the Wine*, by Brian Dykstra, directed by Margaret Perry; and *Jumping Blind*, by Philip Gerson, directed by David Hilder. In addition, there are two Studio Theatre productions: *The Wrath of Aphrodite*, by Tim O'Leary, directed by Martin Casella; and *Steve Hayes' Hollywood Reunion*, written by and starring Steve Hayes. I recently spoke with Harris and Batman about the mission of the festival. Here's what they had to say:



Bruce Robert Harris and Jack W. Batman; photo by Ben Strothmann

JACK W. BATMAN: We are here to showcase the work of the playwrights, because they are the voices of the LGBT community. As it happens, not all of the authors this year are gay, but the plays themselves address issues that we all care about deeply. This is the second year of the festival; last year, we did three main stage productions and two readings, but now we've expanded to five full productions. The TBG Arts Center has two theaters, so some of the shows will be running on the same nights at different times. Last year, we did two plays and a musical; this year, we couldn't find a musical that was right for us, so we're just doing plays. We received submissions from all around the world, from as far away as New Zealand and Australia. I would say the quality of the submissions is way up this year.

BRUCE ROBERT HARRIS: Jack and I read the scripts blind; we don't know who the authors are. We choose the ones we like, and then we pass them to our literary committee. Funnily enough, the plays that rose to the top this year were written by a Pulitzer Prize-nominated poet, a man who has written for *Murder She Wrote* and *Doctor Quinn: Medicine Woman*, and other people with some very impressive credits. So I guess Jack and I have good taste!

JWB: One of the plays we're doing, *Edward the King*, was in our reading series last year. It got such a tremendous response that we wanted to give it a full production. It's a new look at Edward II, and it's a gorgeous play; the author, David Brendan Hopes, is a poet first. When we did the reading last year, we realized that this play deserved to move on. We hope to continue to do readings during the year, so we can find more plays for the festival.

BRH: The idea is to help these plays move on to other theaters, whether in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Key West, or wherever. It's important to us that they continue to have a life beyond the festival.

JWB: Unless you happen to be Charles Busch or Terrence McNally, there's no way that your play is going to be near the top of the pile on any producer's desk. Everyone else's plays are further down in the pile, and I don't know that anyone sifts through those piles the way they should. We feel we're filling a need by presenting works that may not be seen as readily as those written by well-known gay playwrights. Gay theater is a lot further along now that we were in 1970, but today it's so expensive to produce shows on Broadway and in major theaters throughout the country that people aren't likely to take a chance on a new playwright. But if they see the play on its feet at GAYFEST, they might just take the chance.

BRH: I think that's a very important issue. You have new playwrights who cannot afford to produce their own plays, so they submit them to festivals in the hope that someone will recognize their work. These are unknown products that we're investing in. We always need help; we need corporations to say, "Hey, we have a diversity program. Let's put our name on this festival." What I do constantly is search

Medium Rectangle
(300 x 250)

for those pockets of money.

JWB: You know, we don't produce shows with titles like *Naked Boys With Their Pants Down*. We are a not-for-profit organization, we do have corporate sponsors, and our beneficiary is the Harvey Milk High School; so we definitely stay away from salacious material, even if it may be more commercial. It's not appropriate for our sponsors and our beneficiary, and it's not what we want to do anyway.

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