

1993

theatre divas:

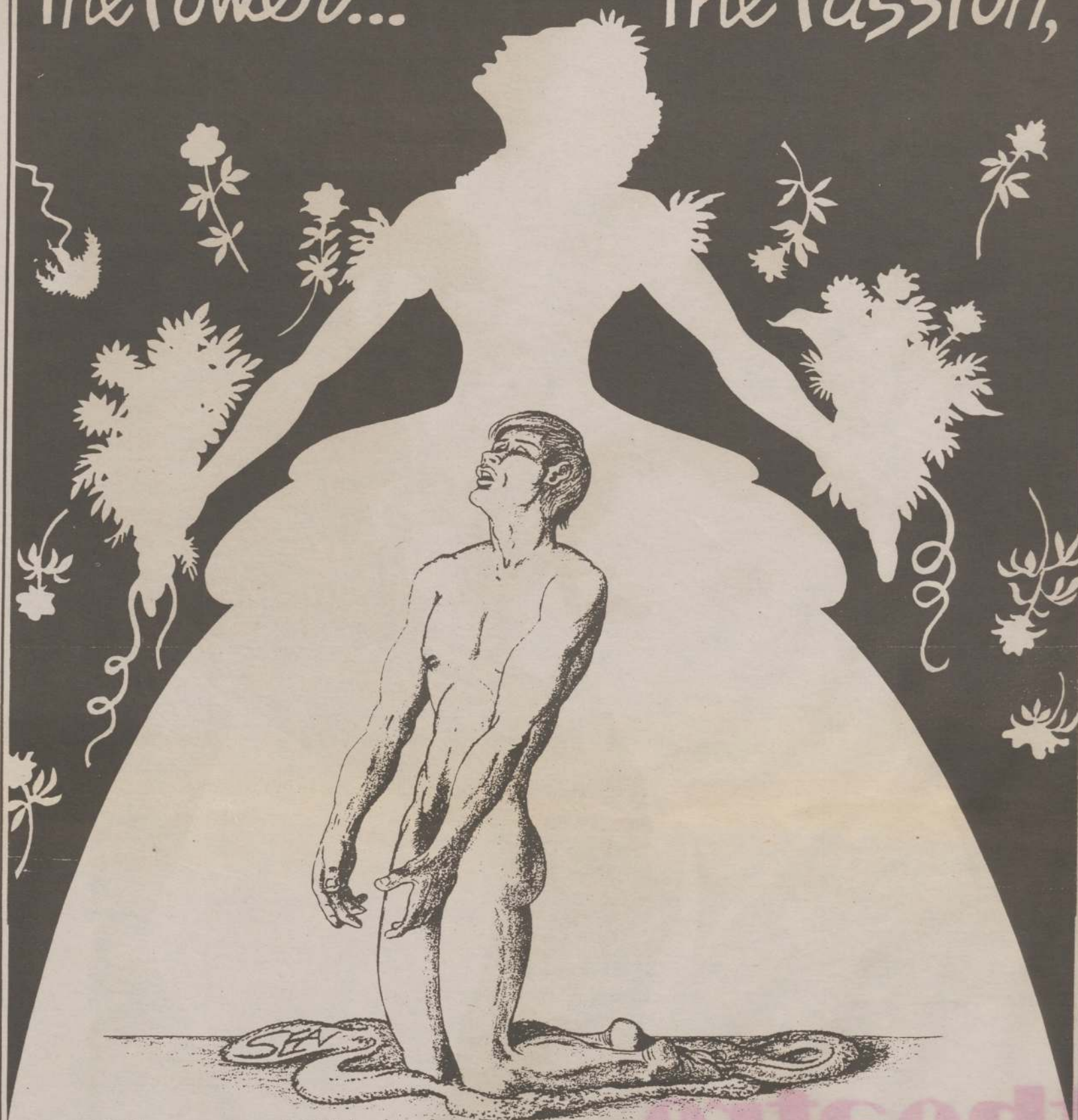
who are they and what
do they want from us?
ten pages of interviews!

resource

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Actors, like the very rich, are not like us.

They exist only to impersonate other people, and what they may be in themselves is nothing to our purpose, or so we maintain. We do not call upon them to produce evidence that they actually possess the character or personality, or even the intellect or passion, which they simulate so convincingly. To us, their believability is all, and if they have the skill to make us believe in something which does not actually exist, so much the better. Women, of course, can afford this sort of exposure of the emperor's nakedness. Making believe you are what you're not is just not manly; better to carry pretense a step further and insist that you always are exactly what you seem. Thus is born the diva.

—Larry Bencort in *The Stars*

On the cover: Francis Jue as Song Liling in Arizona Theatre Company's production of *M. Butterfly*. Local actor Christopher Wynn dishes divadom with Jue on page 4.



Just a couple of actors who aren't naked drag KIMONO MY HOUSE queens sitting around talking.

by Christopher Wynn

Arizona Theatre Company's current production of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* marks the fourth company in which actor Francis Jue has played Song Liling, the Chinese opera star in love with a French diplomat. Hwang's play confronts heady topics like sexuality, gender, deceit, and East-West relations, but much of the press *M. Butterfly* has received has emphasized the show's nudity and transgender subtext. In an interview with local actor Christopher Wynn, himself known for donning frocks and doffing his duds onstage, Jue talks about wearing dresses and the politics of being gay in theater.

Have you played drag before?

Well, sort of. While I was living in San Francisco, I produced a talent show for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation called the Most Questionable Talent Show. I put together a group of friends; we called ourselves the White People's Motown Task Force and Support Group. We sang to Aretha Franklin's "Respect" while wearing powder blue tux jackets, fishnet hose, and big blonde wigs.

That was my initiation into heels. But this is the first time I've ever done full makeup, wigs, the whole drag bit.

Was it hard to get into the drag thing?

I got some really good advice when I first started studying the role. A friend of mine said, "You're wearing a wig, you're wearing makeup, you've got heels on, you've got boobs, you've got butt



pads, your waist is cinched within an inch of your organ's life. You look like a woman. You don't have to play a woman. You play a woman's intentions." That freed me up to just *act*. Prior to that, I was thinking, "Well, how should I cross my legs?"

I played some of Meg Robinson's roles in Charles Busch's comedies, and I found that whole "getting in touch with the female side of myself" six times a week was pretty exhausting.

I've learned a lot from doing this role. Like that panty hose are torture—they had to have been invented by a man. And that it costs way too much money to be a woman. You know, if I were a woman, I'd want that hourglass figure. I'd want all the accoutrement, the jewelry. And who has all that money?

Maybe Chinese opera divas?

I think I've also discovered more what men demand of women. Like how women adopt stereotypes as a way of obtaining any kind of power. So they cross their legs, they totter around in those heels, they wear all that makeup because they know it's expected of them, and in order to get ahead they have to do what's expected of them. It gives them power. I've learned to sympathize a little more.

Playing drag is kind of over the top, like old melodrama. It's not the same as being a woman.

That's where we draw the line in *M. Butterfly*. I'm not playing a woman; I'm playing a man's fantasy of a woman. We're not even meant to believe that I'm playing a woman; you're told in the second scene that I'm a guy.

Are some audience members still surprised to discover there's a man under all that costuming?

Yes, and you know, that's the biggest compliment. People say, "I knew you were a guy coming in, but there were moments when it didn't matter. I think that's what (playwright) David Henry Hwang

**"You're wearing a wig, you're wearing
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wants. He wants us to consider gender issues, racial issues, sexual issues. This isn't a monkey play. This is a much more complicated piece of work.

Will playing a drag queen affect your career?

Gee, I hope not. I think that the perception that I'm a drag queen and not an actor playing a woman comes from the audience. People ask me, "Do you dress like that in real life?" They never ask whether the actor I'm playing opposite has had any experience in a French prison. They assume that, because I fit into the dresses, I do drag for a living. I'm not just this personae they hired to put into this show. This is a character I play.

But casting directors respond to stereotypes as well. My first role on stage in this town was as a woman, and in my second acting job here I appeared completely naked. Now, whenever they need a drag queen or a naked body onstage, they call me.

I spend two hours on stage in a dress, and half an hour in a suit, and people remember the dress and not the suit. That's just the way it's going to be. I'm very much out of the closet, and I've had some resistance to being seen for straight roles in the past; I'd like to think I'll be considered as an actor and not just a flamboyant queen. So, in a way I guess this role can both help and hurt my career. But it's a great part.

Did you freak out the first time you had to put all this stuff on?

At first, it was pretty ugly. It took me awhile to get used to looking at myself in the mirror. When my dad first saw me, before the show, with no makeup, he said, "What do you look like as a girl?" I said I kind of look like a Miss Chinatown contestant. And he said, "That bad, huh?" Later, he told me I looked like a cross between Dorothy Lamour and Joan Crawford. Well, they're both women, so I must be doing something right.

There's a scene in *M. Butterfly* where you take all of your clothes off. Do many people walk out when you strip?

I don't know, because I never look at the audience when I'm naked. That moment is not supposed to be sexy, attractive or alluring. It's incredibly ugly, offensive, I've shattered something, I've killed this man's vision of his Oriental lotus blossom. If I was supposed to be going "Va-va-voom!" I'd really be in trouble.

But you're naked, in front of hundreds of people.

You've done nude scenes before. Was it difficult for you?

In *Dangerous Liaisons*, in tech rehearsal, I just remember them taking about a half an hour figuring out how to light my ass to advantage. But there were some little old ladies tottering up the aisle when my nudie scene came on.

Here's some advice: If they ask you to take your clothes off, ask for an extra hundred dollars more per week. If they want you to put on a dress, ask for more money. And if they ask you to do interviews in the nude, it's an extra five hundred bucks a week.

Is your character a diva?

Yes! She's a star! A Peking opera diva! In real life, the character was known as the Jade Beauty. When you hold jade, it stays cold.

I did shows in Chicago for several years, and my lover knew a lot of drag queens. They all appeared very confident, and they were all very fucked up.

I know a lot of drag queens in San Francisco. For some of them, it's a power thing: Chicks with dicks! They get to be a woman and a man, too.

I knew some drag queens in Chicago who would have sex with men and the men wouldn't know they were guys.

Most of the prostitutes in New York are transvestites.

You started out as a dancer.

Yeah. I wanted to do *West Side Story* and the dream ballet in *Oklahoma*. God. I finally decided that dance was satisfying, but not satisfying enough. I wanted to interpret with my mind and voice as well. I also discovered that I didn't like a lot of dancers. They have this primary fascination with their bodies, and they're more vicious at auditions than any other performers I've ever worked with.

To wear sheer tights and a big fur seems to be a dancer's greatest aspiration.

To be in a Blackglama ad. In tights and a stole.

Don't all gay men want to be musical comedy stars?

Right. I thought that all gay men knew the words to "Over the Rainbow." One of the most shocking things about coming out was discovering that there were gay guys out there who were Republicans.

Half of the hubbub over this show was making this into some kind of drag show where people get nude.

Naked drag queens! I know. But the play is so much more than that. One of the great things about this play is it doesn't answer a lot of questions. It poses questions, and people can choose the answers they want. The play is about choosing fantasy over reality and the consequences of that. In reality, we all live very sterile lives. If we can convince ourselves that all the accoutrements are right, then we're okay.

Arizona Theatre Company's *M. Butterfly* plays through Sunday, May 2nd at the Herberger Theatre Center.

is Linda Balgord a diva?

Christopher Wynn quizzes the *Aspects of Love* star.



Andrew Lloyd Webber has been quoted as saying that no one has sung the part of Rose in *Aspects of Love* as well as you do.

Well, that didn't stop him from putting his ex-wife in the show in San Francisco.

You sound bitter.

Don't print that.

You've played so many divas: Fanny Brice, Eva Peron...

They're all very powerful women. I'd like to play a nice, normal woman sometime. Someone no one's ever done before.

When Patty LuPone was doing *Evita*, she claimed she had Eva Peron visitations.

That's weird, because that happened to me, too. I had a dream one night about dying from cancer.

You've gotten raves all over the country. When do you get the fur and the little dog?

Never a fur. Maybe a fake one. A dog? I can hardly take care of myself on tour.

That's where your personal dresser comes in.

I did get one lousy review. The critic said I just wasn't femme fatale material. I just love having my sexuality questioned in public.

Let's talk wigs. How many do you wear in *Aspects of Love*?

None! They built three wigs for me, and the director didn't like them. So I just wear my own hair.

But you age twenty years in the course of the show.

My director insists that a famous actress would maintain a certain look.

Critics often refer to you as "Garlandesque."

Judy Garland's voice was incredible, and she could break your heart. Everyone loved her, so it's a great compliment when people compare me to her.

There's a lesbian angle to *Aspects of Love*.

In this production, it's really suggested more than anything. When Rose and Julietta meet, you think they're going to hate each other because they're rivals for George. There's a scene where the two women kiss, which shocks quite a lot of people. I can't believe that people are shocked by that. But I guess you don't see two women kissing on stage very often.

Has this scene led to any strange marriage proposals from fans?

No. Not even any flowers from strange men. I guess I should feel neglected.

Do you make divaesque demands, or maybe rough up a stagehand once in a while?

No. I hear that Frank Sinatra asks for twelve rolls of cherry LifeSavers in his dressing room. But from me, there's no star bullshit. No diva fits. I just do the work and go home.

Actress Linda Balgord will appear in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Aspects of Love* at Gammage Auditorium April 27 through May 2.

John Sankovich

knows from

divas. He's trod the boards for three decades and has crossed paths with some formidable dames. Sankovich has his patter down: On everything from toupees to hets in theater, he **sets the record straight.**

What makes a diva?

Divas is an attitude, more than anything else. Before a diva opens her mouth, she knows what her next line is. In life, I mean. The diva is the ultimate professional. She's had tough breaks and now she has longevity. That's where the knowledge comes from.

Tell me a diva story.

I cannot use names here. I was doing *The King and I*, and I was taller than the leading man. He told the director that I should play my scenes with my nose to the floor. Comes his big scene with the leading lady, and he's supposed to rip his shirt off. Well, he didn't have a chest to speak of, so he's

which of you is the diva in that story.

I can be difficult, if that's what denotes a diva. When I'm working with people and they're not prepared, if they haven't done their homework, I can be difficult.

Who are you to say whether someone is prepared or not?

Theodore Bikel walks into a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and tells the directors, the actors how he will run his scenes. People say he's a diva. I say to them, don't work with him, then. But if you do, he's the reason you're taking home a paycheck. He's the reason there's another production of *Fiddler* that you've been cast in.

What do divas do when they're not onstage?

They make movies. I did a scene in (the movie version of) *Funny Lady* with Barbra Streisand. And we were instructed not to speak to Miss Streisand. And we didn't rehearse with her, we rehearsed with her stand-in. But by that time, she'd done it on Broadway, she had an Oscar, she'd done *The Way We Were*. We expected a diva.

All the great ladies of the stage are fag hags. How come?

They have balls. Gay men are attracted to women with a lot of balls.

We hear about the importance of performers remaining closeted, that no one will hire you if they know you're a queer. But if the rumors are true, everyone in the entertainment industry is gay. So who's hiding from whom?

There's a pretty even mix of straights and gays in theater, and unfortunately, the closet ends up mattering. But Hollywood is worse. Very homophobic. Look at Brad Davis. He was a hard drug user, and he got AIDS. And he had to keep it hushed up because he didn't want people to think he was gay. That's really sad.

Talk to me about nepotism in show business.

I roomed with Patty Davis at USC. We were working on our Masters degrees in theater, and she told me about nepotism. She said her father (Ronald

Reagan) could open doors for her, but he couldn't keep them open. If you don't have the goods to deliver, you're out. There's too much money involved.

You're a name dropper.

I have a good Liza Minelli story. Barbara Streisand was in New York, and she went to see Liza in *Flora the Red Menace*. And Streisand went backstage, and she said to Liza, "Look. Either imitate your mother, or imitate me. But don't do both of us at the same time."

There doesn't seem to be a lot of that kind of candor in your business. There's a special form of sincerity, it seems, among theater people.

I don't socialize. I will go out with actors in a group, but I can't deal with it all the time. The insincerity does exist. There are some people in this town who will stab you in the back. There are others who can't separate their personal and professional lives. I don't like it when a performer drags in a nine-pound bag of shit with them to work, and that's what happens when you don't separate your personal life from your professional life.

No way.

I went to a shrink in Los Angeles. Best money I ever spent. He just said to me, "You know, you can't please everybody all the time." And actors tend to do that, and that's where that insincerity comes in.

What's the one woman's role you most want to play?

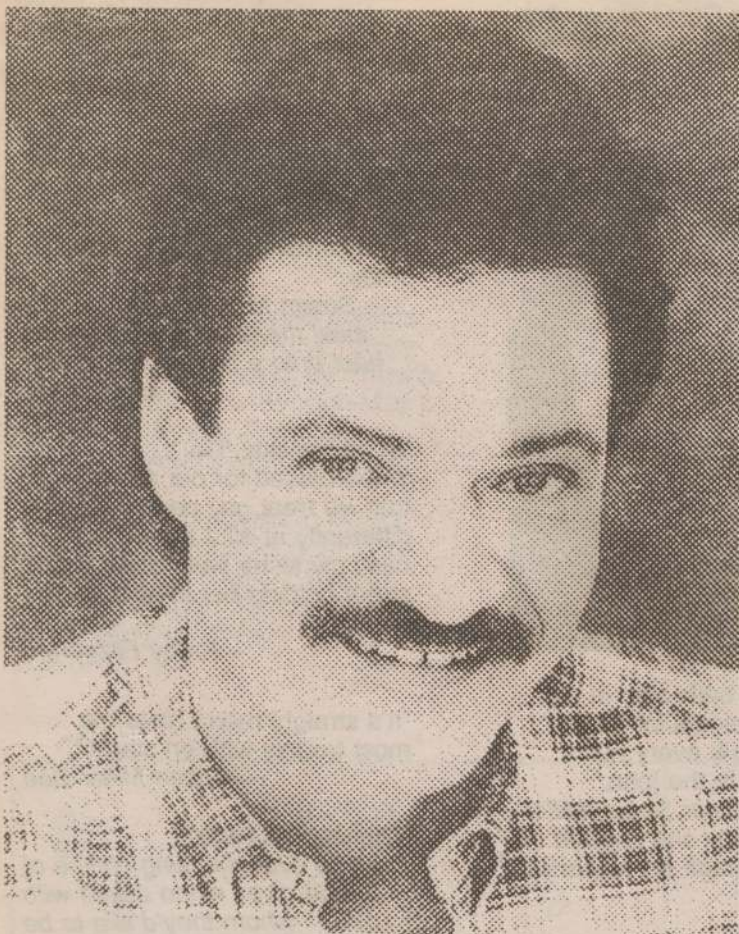
Vera Charles (in *Auntie Mame*). I sound like Bea Arthur anyway. I'd look like a quarterback for the Rams.

I've always thought Lillian Gish would play you in The John Sankovich Story.

Lillian Gish? That's a stupid question.

Is that your real hair?

If this were a wig, I wouldn't be grey on one side and not the other. I look like a fucking schnauzer. Do I sound like a diva?



trying to tell the director he won't show his chest in the scene. And I'd had it. I pulled my nose up off the floor and let this guy have it. I deballed him. It was really stupid. In the end, he saw things my way.

I'm having a hard time figuring out

Interview by R. Pela
Photo courtesy of Stills in Motion

stage divas speak

by Neil Cohen

**THEY'RE SMART.
THEY'RE SASSY.
THEY GET TO WEAR
REALLY COOL
CLOTHES AND
HAVE DANCING**

waiters salute them in song. But what do Valley stage divas really think about their exalted status? What quotes from their past first foretold of their futures as gay icons? Why are they Kyle Lawson pin-up girls, while you're not?

"We had a couple of divas on 42nd Street, I won't use names, and they took one look at the stage and said, 'Is this what we're dancing on? No one will hear us tap.' I told them, 'You'll be lucky if they can't hear you.'"
—Noelle Irick on the proper care and feeding of divas.

"Did everyone get fucking amnesia out there?!"
—Sexy siren Susan Arnold, offering her co-stars a little friendly criticism backstage.

"Well, Janelle Robbins was strung up with lights and she kept shorting out. If it wasn't her boobs, it was her crotch."
—Choreographer and fellow Gypsy stripper JoAnn Yeoman on the perils of baring it all in the name of art.

"I don't mean to sound egotistical, but I don't think I have competition in town. I mean, there's just not another big-mouthed redhead with big tits who can act and dance and sing."
—Big-mouthed, big-titted actress Kathy Fitzgerald on the key to her success.

Well, I didn't write the fucking script!"
—A fed-up Susan Arnold, to temperamental co-star Bill Phillips, regarding his lack of lines.

"I hope no one ever makes fun of you like that!"
—Former Statehouse big wig Rose Mofford to diva Robyn Ferracane on Ferracane's impersonation of Mofford in the recent Herberger Headliners.



"He's a beautiful gay man and when he kissed me, I felt like I would die. I would walk out on stage every night thinking, 'I know I can change him! I know I can...'"
—Kathy Fitzgerald on Minor Demons co-star Jack Wetherall.

"Better than chocolate. Better than sex. That's just about as bitchin' as it gets."
—Fitzgerald on her standing ovation on opening night of Search For Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe.

"I've been recognized in the strangest places—usually bathrooms."
—Robyn Ferracane, on the price of fame.

"There were all these people standing around, and I said 'Hi,' and he said, 'Hi, can I see your pussy?'"
—Mollie Kellogg-Cirino on her last fan encounter.

"I've had people painting obnoxious, gross pictures of me, and leaving them

backstage: 'This is Susan Miller-Dee,' a little stick figure with no boobs. I've had that happen."

—Susan Miller-Dee

"I sleep with the director now."
—Mollie Kellogg-Cirino, on how her marriage (to Planet Earth Theatre director Peter Cirino) has affected her career.

"I didn't know I was a diva. I thought I was the oldest living chorus girl in captivity."
—Noelle Irick

"I don't think people believe that I mow the lawn, but I do."
—Grande dame Carolyn Paine, dispelling myths about herself.

"I was going out with this real cheapskate, and on opening night he gave me a bank made out of a tin can. I was doing Tintypes at the time, so I guess he thought it went together."
—Robyn Ferracane

"My boob fell out onstage. That was fun."
—Kathy Fitzgerald on her favorite stage memory



"I went to the bathroom in my habit and my scapular fell in the toilet. I think every nun's scapular falls in the john."
—Feisty Sister Susan Miller-Dee, on why she dripped on stage in Nunsense.

"I'm sort of paranoid. They scare the pants off of me."
—JoAnn Yeoman on "moral values" groups and their anti-gay initiatives.



"Thank you. I just had the worst day."
—Robyn Ferracane, accepting her Best Actress Zony for Hello, Dolly!

"I'd let Chris Curcio on. He'd be the lightest. He'd probably taste the best if we had to eat him. He's certainly eaten me enough times."
—Susan Miller-Dee, on which local theater critic she would haul onto a lifeboat if the ship went down.

"In all honesty, I'm embarrassed for our society that we treat gay people differently at all. I mean why can't my sister walk down the street holding her lover's hand?"
—Kathy Fitzgerald

"It's straight men I have the most trouble with on stage."
—Susan Miller-Dee

"Michael Santorico!"
—The overwhelming choice of stage divas when asked with whom they'd like to be marooned on a desert island.

"Scotch!"
—JoAnn Yeoman on how to make it through a bad production.

art spaces

Nelson Fine Arts Center: "Special Collections: The Photographic Order From Pop to Now" examines how 26 photographers and artists have grouped, collected and categorized photographic images to create complete artworks. Featured artists include Andy Warhol, Sol LeWitt, John Balesari, Alan Rath, Ed Ruscha and Rick Hock. Thirty years of reciprocal influences between the photographic image and pop art, conceptualism and post-modernism are also illustrated. Now through May 23. "Hogarth's Prints: The Good, the Bad and the Funny" will be featured now through May 15. Views of 18th century British life are reflected in several suites. Free. 8:30am-4:30pm, Tuesdays-Fridays; 10am-5pm, Saturdays; 1-5pm, Sundays. Mill Ave and 10th St. 965-ARTS.

Scottsdale Center for the Arts: The center's mall is lined with local chefs' finest creations. Live entertainment. Now through April 25. 7383 Scottsdale Mall. 994-2301.

Phoenix Art Museum: "The Art of Seeing: John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye" is the world premier of an extensive exhibition on Ruskin that includes many paintings never before available in the U.S. Now through May 23. "Fans and Fashion" explores the role of fans as an indispensable fashion accessory. Now through August 29. Museum hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10am to 5pm, Wednesday until 9pm; Sunday noon-5pm. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$1.50 for students. No charge on Wednesdays. 1625 N. Central Ave. 257-1222.

Small World Miniature Club Exhibit: Showcasing attic vignettes, houses, shops, furnishings and collections, all done to scale. 8am-5pm. Valley Bank Center Concourse. Central and Van Buren. 221-1005.

Memorial Union Fine Arts Lounge: Quilts by Ruth Garrison of Tempe and mixed-media works by Phoenix artist Jeff Falk. Now through May 3, 8am-8pm, Monday-Friday. Free admission. ASU's MU. 965-3502.

Ethnic Artifacts: "Myths in Masks," an exhibition of masks from West Africa, on exhibit May 1-May 31. Mondays through Saturdays 10am-6pm. Park Central Mall (west end). 265-1910.

theater

Death By Dominatrix: Gregory Paxton's comedy about masochism, transsexuality, and homosexuality in *Rocky Horror Picture Show* savoir faire. Now through April 25; Fridays and Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 4pm. \$9. Planet Earth, 909 N. 3rd St. Friday, April 30 at 10pm and midnight, Saturday, May 1 at 10pm at Valley Art Theatre, 509 S. Mill, Tempe. 241-1828.

Real Women Do! This musical cabaret act, featuring six women singing Broadway hits, plays Thursdays at 8pm and 10:15pm through the end of April. Show Space Cafe, 7117 E. Sixth Ave., Scottsdale. 423-0557.

Jesus Christ Superstar: April 30-May 23. Theatre Works, 6615 W. Thunderbird Rd., Glendale. 979-9003.

M. Butterfly: Doesn't everyone know the secret by now? Now through May 2. Herberger Theater Center, 222 E. Monroe. 252-8497.

The Doctor In Spite of Himself: In this hilarious play, the comic genius Moliere administers generous doses of slapstick and romance, with a few mistaken identities and a lot of running around thrown in for good measure. Thursday-Sunday, Now through May 1, 8pm. Tickets: \$10. Paul V. Galvin Playhouse. 965-6447.

Deadlock: A tragic comedy of three generations lost together in the adversities of their separate lives. Thursdays-Saturdays at 8pm, now until May 15. Tickets: \$9. Playwright's Workshop Theatre, 3302 N. 7th St. 279-5151.

Billy Bishop Goes to War: Billy and his piano-playing friend recount his adventures as a World War I flying ace. This charming musical also packs a political punch. Now through May 8. 8pm. Herberger Theater Center, 222 E. Monroe. 252-8497.

Wizard of Oz: Yo, Dorothy. The classic comes to Phoenix. Fridays, 7:30pm; Saturdays, 2pm and 7:30pm; Sundays, 2pm and 7pm. Now through May 8. \$8. Theater Works, 6615 W. Thunderbird Rd. 486-8636.

Aspects of Love: Andrew Lloyd Webber's newest production is a musical for lovers, about an impoverished actress who accepts a young man's invitation to spend two weeks at a villa in France. Tuesday through Sunday, April 27-May 2, 8pm. Tickets: \$23-\$37.

culture club

Valley Broadway Series. ASU's Gammage Auditorium, Mill and Apache Blvd. 965-3434.

Some of My Best Friends Are...: A collage musical on the experience of being gay in 1990s America. Saturday and Sunday, May 1 and 2 at 8pm. Tickets: \$4-\$8. Lyceum Theatre, ASU. 965-6447.

bj bud

For The Time Being Players: This all-women improvisational group gives weekly performances exploring life and comedy from a woman's perspective. Admission is \$5. Saturdays at 8pm at Liza's Cafe, 1945 W. Baseline Rd. in Mesa. 838-7338.

The Ozymoron Improvisational Comedy Troupe: Performances every Saturday night at 7:30pm. \$5. Star Theater, 7146 E. 6th Ave., Scottsdale. 423-0120.

Heirlooms: Set in the Victorian era, this musical comedy depicts the passing of heirlooms from mothers to children and children to their mothers. Friday, May 7 and 21 at 7pm; Sunday, May 9 at 5pm. All shows include a gourmet meal. \$25. Goldie's 1895 House Theatre, 362 N. 2nd Ave. 254-0338.

performance

David Riggs: Teller of tales and world traveler Riggs weaves his tales with costume and wit. "South of the Border," Friday May 14 and 28, 7pm. All dinner shows are \$25. Goldie's 1895 Theatre, 362 N. 2nd Ave. 254-0338.

Sunday A'Fair: Showcasing new talent at noon prior to a featured band of the day at 2pm. Food, artists, gift shop. Free admission. Every Sunday through the end of April at Scottsdale Mall, 7383 Scottsdale Mall. 994-2301.

Guitar Ensemble: Free performance at 7:30pm, Monday, April 26. Katzin Concert Hall, Music Building, ASU. 965-TUNE.

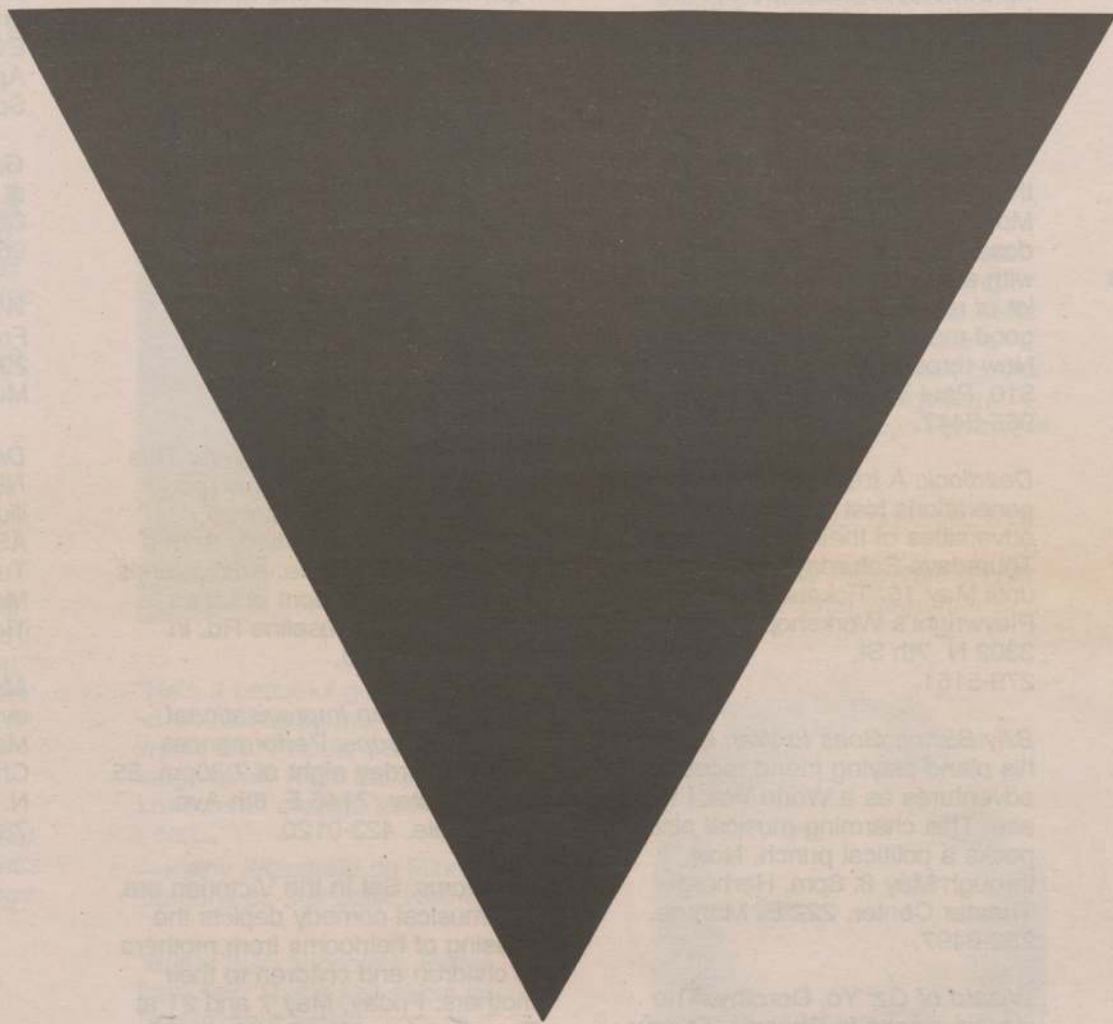
Women's Choir and Concert Choir: Free performance. Thursday, April 29, 7:30pm. Katzin Concert Hall, Music Building, ASU. 965-TUNE.

David Copperfield: Magic for the Nineties: Internationally acclaimed illusionist Copperfield will appear at ASU's Gammage Auditorium, Tuesday, May 4 and Wednesday, May 5 at 5:30pm and 8:30pm. Tickets are \$20-\$35. 965-3434.

Marvin Hamlisch: An elegant evening of music and laughter on May 7 at 8pm. Tickets: \$19-\$36. Chandler Center for the Arts, 250 N. Arizona Ave., Chandler. 786-3954.

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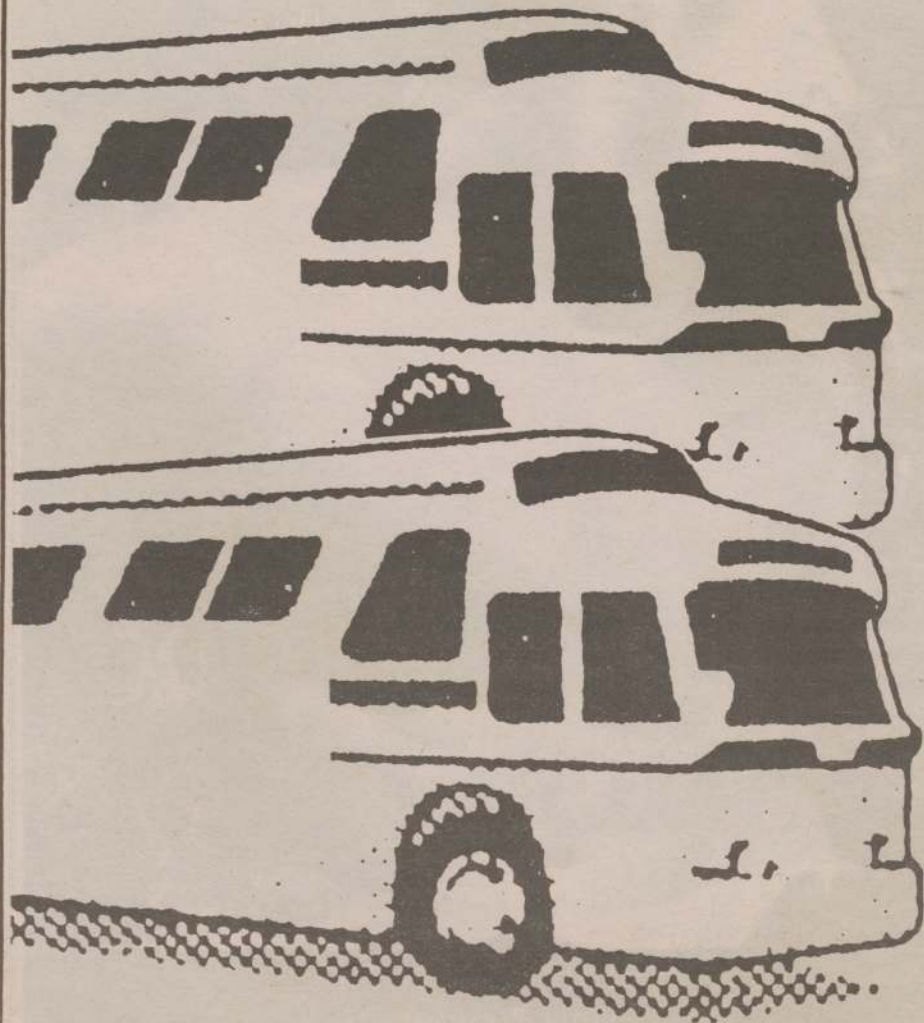
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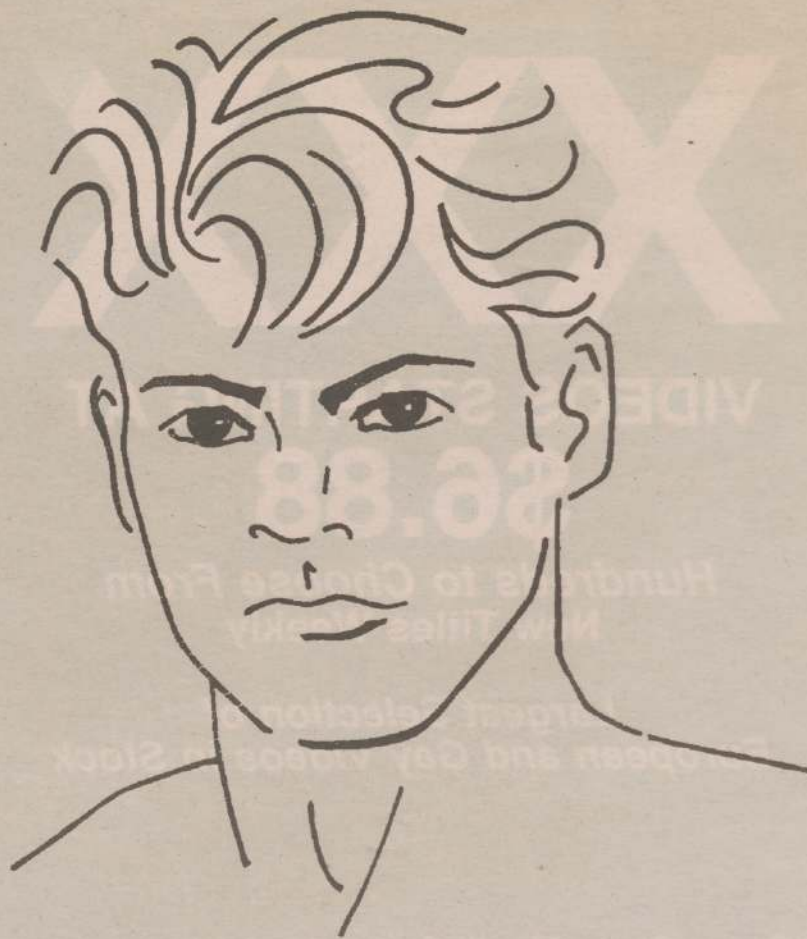
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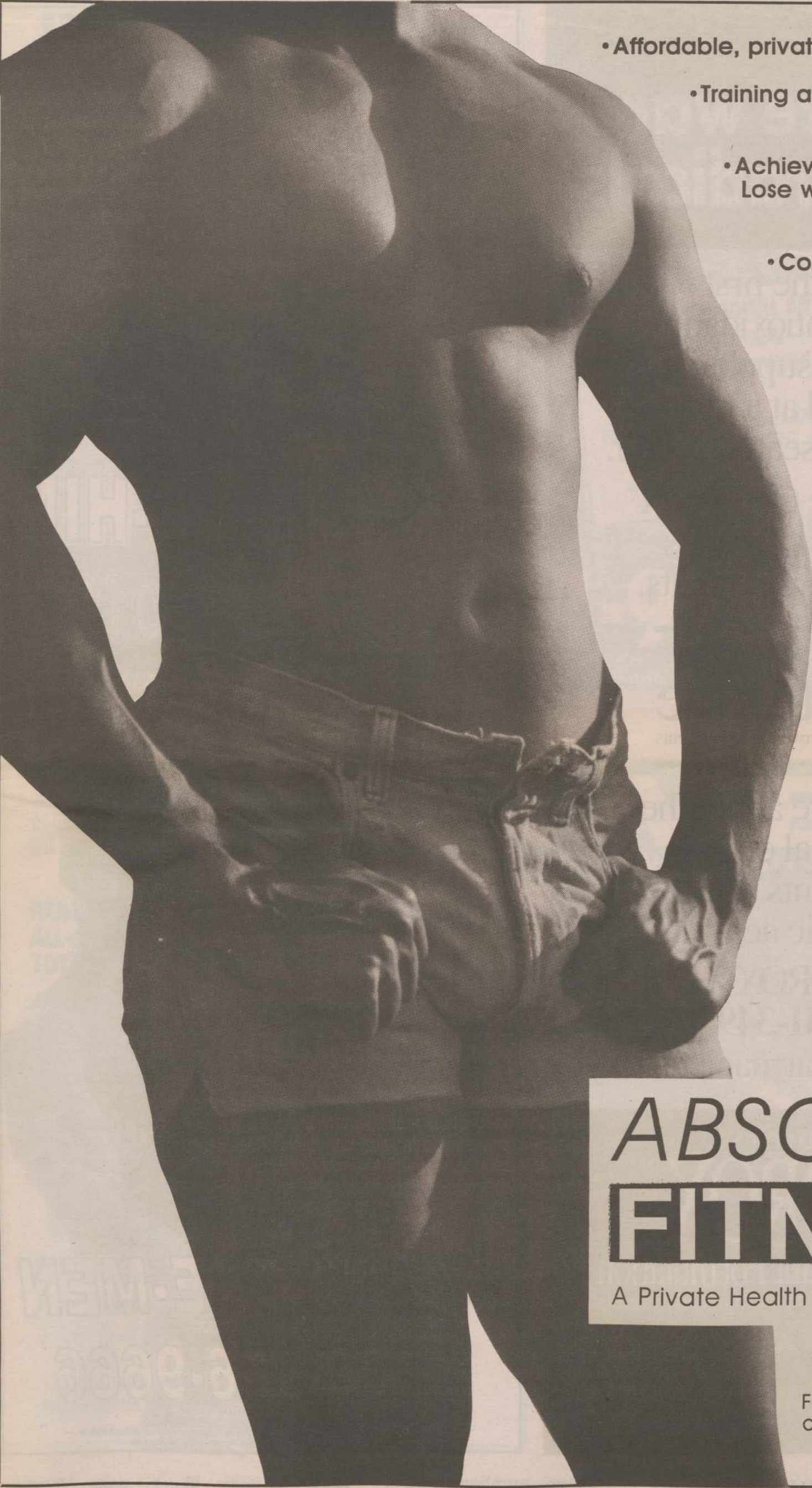


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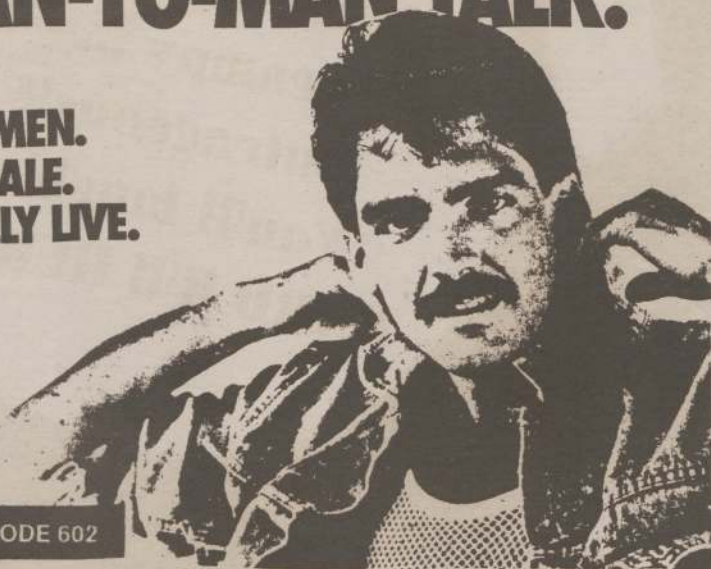
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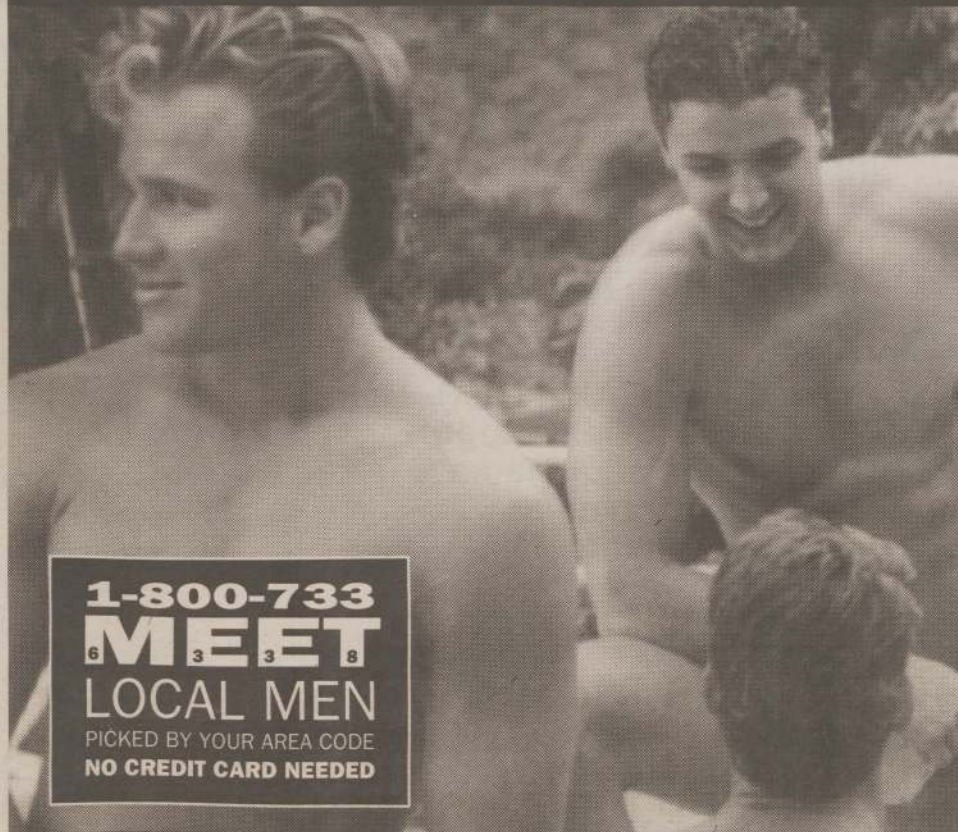
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