



# SGN



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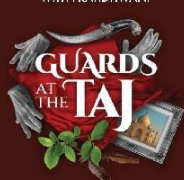
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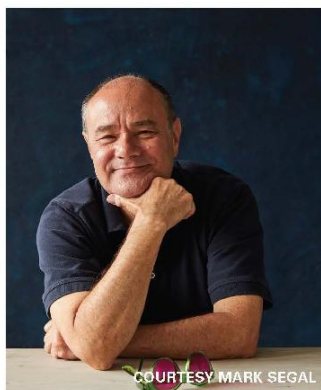
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# Op-Ed: GLAAD's Sarah Kate Ellis bought chandelier with your donations

BY MARK SEGAL



COURTESY MARK SEGAL

*Note: This article is based on an investigation by the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/01/business/glaad-ceo-spending.html>*

What would you suggest if a politician used public tax funds to rent a seven-bedroom Swiss chateau, remodel their home office, rent a vacation home in Provincetown for their family, and enjoy first-class air travel and Mercedes car service at their whim? You'd likely call for their resignation, or at the very least an investigation to determine if any laws were broken.

The same standards should apply to leaders of our LGBT nonprofits. All the examples I just mentioned were actions taken by Sarah Kate Ellis, who has led GLAAD since 2014. While she has built a formidable organization, raking in millions in donations, she seems to have become

excessively comfortable with spending those on her own lifestyle. There used to be a term for those in our community who were overpaid: "Gay Inc." Her spending is nothing less than — and I'm being polite here — gay greed.

This is a subject I know well, having fought mainstream media's depictions and censorship of the LGBT community — a field that I, along with others, pioneered in 1972, long before GLAAD existed and when Sarah Kate Ellis was one year old. We did this by disrupting live TV shows like *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. These actions led to agreements with CBS News (thanks to Walter himself) and with Ay Westin at ABC in 1973. Years later, we worked with Cathy Renna, who was the national news media director at a new organization called GLAAD, and we secured its first victory by canceling a nationally syndicated show called *Dr. Laura*.

Through these and other efforts, we fought to give visibility to our community and lift us out of the darkness of invisibility. We did this out of passion for our community, making it possible for many of you today to have the privilege to be your true selves. It was a labor of love. We did not receive chandeliers or chateaus. Most of the time, we ended up in jail.

This week's *New York Times* investigative report reveals that GLAAD's Ellis has lived a life of luxury on your donations — into the millions of dollars. This includes renting a seven-bedroom Swiss chateau and a vacation home in Provincetown, remodeling her home office for \$20,000, enjoying Mercedes car service, and flying

first class — along with a salary listed in 2021 at \$575,000, with additional compensation over \$27,000. That's \$600,000 without travel, for an organization that has a half-million-dollar yearly travel budget.

But there's one item in the *Times* report that stands out and should tell you all you need to know: that \$20,000 remodeling of her home office included a chandelier.

Nonprofits should not operate like this, and such behavior would not be tolerated in other communities. Even right-wing organizations have been targets for similar practices. Just think of (the National Rifle Association. Can you imagine the executive directors of the NAACP or Amnesty International behaving similarly?

Of course, GLAAD spokesperson Richard Ferraro has attempted to defend her, spouting lines similar to: "She's going to comply with new rules." "She needed the lavish housing for meetings," and "We don't think she can get that bonus of \$1.3 million in her final year." Nothing is said about the \$150,000 signing bonus, the \$250,000 exit bonus, or how her yearly bonus system works. For a group focused on communications, Mr. Ferraro gets an F in communicating.

In the last few days, I've spoken to many LGBT pioneers who've been fighting for equality for over 50 years. Most of us request that Ellis never again describe herself as an activist, since many of us view her as a profiteer.

The word about GLAAD is that they are more interested in hobnobbing with celebrities to bring in donations. When you misuse those donations for home chandeliers, Swiss chateaus, and vacation homes, you start morphing into the lifestyles of those celebrities, which makes you part of their world and not our world.

GLAAD has value for our community, but for it to be reputable again, it has some housecleaning to do. That means sweeping out the disreputable Sarah Kate Ellis and searching for someone who will bring transparency and honor back to the organization. Its focus should be on building community, not building chandeliers.

*Mark Segal is an American journalist. He is the founder and publisher of Philadelphia Gay News and has won numerous journalism awards for his column "Mark My Words," including best column by The National Newspaper Association, Suburban Newspaper Association, and the Society of Professional Journalists.*

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# Upcoming Seattle Arts & Lectures events to showcase LGBTQ+ and BIPOC writers, innovators

BY KYLIN BROWN

L-TO-R: SANDRA CISNEROS, DANEZ SMITH, JUSTICE KETANJI BROWN JACKSON. COURTESY SEATTLE ARTS & LECTURES.

This fall, Seattle Arts & Lectures (SAL) is set to host an exciting lineup of trailblazers and innovative writers from various fields, including Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, poet Danez Smith, and novelist Sandra Cisneros, among others. Authors will engage in discussions regarding their latest works, celebrate their previous ones, and delve into Q&A sessions with special guests.

The SAL Presents series features authors, artists, and prominent thinkers discussing their latest works, as well as other exciting literary surprises. Last year's lineup featured Rick Riordan, Oliver Jeffers, David Brooks, Kristin Hannah, Sohla El-Wayly, and Kathleen Hanna. Other series include the Literary Arts series, Poetry series, and Meet Cute series, among others.

### The 2024–25 SAL Presents series

On Sept. 9, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson will kick off the 2024–25 SAL Presents speaker series in Benaroya Hall with a discussion of her recent memoir, *The Lovely One*, which chronicles her life story and path to becoming a jurist and the first

Black woman to ever be appointed to the Supreme Court.

"With this unflinching account, *Lovely One: A Memoir* invites readers into her life and world, tracing her family's ascent from segregation to her confirmation on America's highest court within the span of one generation," reads the SAL website description.

The second speaker in this year's series is Connie Chung, whose recent work *Connie* delves into her breakthrough career as the first Asian woman to succeed in the overwhelmingly white- and male-dominated television news industry. Chung will speak on Sept. 24 at Town Hall Seattle. This event also features a Q&A with Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist Lori Matsukawa.

Chung was also the first woman to co-anchor *The CBS Evening News*, the flagship news broadcast on CBS, and the second woman to anchor any network evening broadcast in television history.

SAL Presents will continue its four-part series on Oct. 20 at Benaroya Hall with "A Conversation with Ta Nehisi-Coates," which will center on his latest collection

of essays, *The Message*. The fourth author-speaker, Merlin Sheldrake, is not set to come to Seattle until May 21, 2025.

### Upcoming in the Poetry, Encore, and Meet Cute series

On Sept. 27, SAL's Poetry series will bring Black, Queer, and Poet and writer Danez Smith for a lecture about their latest collection, *Bluff*.

Following a two-year artistic silence after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, *Bluff* is Danez Smith's personal reckoning with their role and responsibility as a poet and with their hometown of the Twin Cities.

"In this soaring collection, Smith turns to honesty, hope, rage, and imagination to envision futures that seem possible," reads the event description.

Then, on Oct. 8, by popular demand, SAL's Encore series will bring back to Town Hall Seattle Queer author Sandra Cisneros, a writer, performer, and artist, whose widely celebrated novel *The House on Mango Street* recently turned 40. Cisneros's last author talk with SAL was in

October of 2003 as the the coming-of-age novel turned 20, and still now, it remains a beloved classic for readers of all ages and walks of life.

Another notable LGBTQ+ author, NYC-based Casey McQuiston, will join SAL as a speaker for the three part romance-and-joy-centered Meet Cute series on Oct. 31 at Rainier Arts Center.

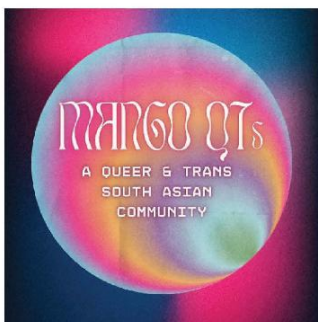
McQuiston is well-known for their best-sellers *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *One Last Stop*, and will discuss their compelling new romantic comedy *The Pairing*, about two Bisexual exes accidentally booking the same European food and wine tour. Oops!

Upcoming events from SAL also include free local readings and performances from the Writers in the Schools and Youth Poetry Fellowship programs, such as the four-part series "Murmurations: Local Voices Taking Flight."

Find Seattle Arts & Lectures full events lineup and buy tickets online at <http://www.lectures.org/events>. Ticket options for all events include a pay what you can scale and subscriptions.

## Social group sprouts space for Seattle's South Asian community

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER



Mango QTs' dedication to Seattle's South Asian Queer and Transgender community has filled part of a social gap. The group, which is only active on Instagram, was organized by someone who wishes to remain anonymous.

Having emerged from an event this person organized called "Mango Bitches Unite," Mango QTs specifically caters to those who identify as "desi" (those from the Indian subcontinent) and people of the South Asian diaspora, including those who are Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Nepalese, Afghani, or Bhutanese. The group is inclusive of those who

have low exposure to foreign or modern-century culture.

South Asian immigrants began deepening their Seattle roots during the 1960s, according to Visit Seattle, which mentions how the cultural Asian traditions have influenced the city's garden designs and architecture.

"Seattle has other spaces and communities for East Asians, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander folks, and none for the brown-skinned folks of the Indian subcontinental region. I am trying to fill that gap," reads an Instagram post.

A picnic event on July 21 welcomed 21

attendees, and Mango QTs hopes to continue expanding the group.

"Today we agreed that we want this group to be values aligned. We agreed on anti-oppression values: abolition, anti-imperialism, re-indigenization, and caste abolition," states the post. "Although this is a primarily social community, there may be opportunities to organize in the future."

Those interested can follow @MangoQTs on Instagram.

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# LGBT+ Outdoors connects the Queer community with Washington's wilds

BY LAURA JOHNSON

A BACKPACKING TRIP TO SUMMIT LAKE  
PHOTO BY BROOKE FISCUS

The forests of Washington are filled with more bears and fairies and other Queer types in recent years, thanks to the state's chapter of the LGBT+ Outdoors program. Queer people from Bellingham to Spokane have joined the international nonprofit to learn outdoor skills, meet fellow nature enthusiasts, and find a welcoming wilderness community.

Brooke Fiscus, a program ambassador for the Everett area, signed up for her position because she wanted to combine her love and knowledge of the outdoors with her own identity as a Queer person.

"In my experience, I don't see many other Queer [people] working in the outdoor industry or [out] on the trails in the woods," Fiscus said. "I'm hoping that, by being an example of a Queer person who finds the outdoors grounding and safe, I can model for others that being involved in outdoor spaces is for everyone."

### Queering the outdoors

LGBT+ Outdoors is a national program that facilitates group trips in outdoor settings across the United States; it also puts

on LGBT Outdoorfest, hosts a podcast, and conducted a visibility survey to collect information about the experiences of Queer people in outdoor settings. There are local chapter events too.

Justin Yoder, founder of LGBT+ Outdoors, started the program in Texas. His main goals were to combat "the stereotype that Gay people don't like the outdoors and to encourage the Queer community that you can get outside too."

Yoder started an Instagram page to engage Queer people as he and his husband Patrick hiked around the Fort Worth area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, two people contacted him about starting an ambassador program locally.

One of the first events was a fishing trip in Texas. The ambassador told Yoder later about a moment they had while sitting underneath a bridge, listening to Britney Spears. The ambassador asked the group if anyone had ever been fishing with another Queer person before, and nobody raised their hand.

"It really struck me and got me a little bit emotional," Yoder explained, "because yes,

it's totally fine and great to go do things outdoors with our straight friends and allies, but there's something about doing something with a core group that you can understand and relate to in a deeper way."

### Washington events

Since 2020, LGBT+ Outdoors has set up chapters in 25 locations in the United States. Ambassadors volunteer their time to plan an event every two months and are responsible for taking photos with the program's flag during each adventure. The Washington chapter became active in August 2023.

Fiscus has hosted activities such as hikes in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, a mini-golf outing, and a backcountry camping trip to Summit Lake. She found the events to be rewarding.

"I've been able to hear the stories of how others got involved in the outdoors, as well as learn about their lives. For many, it was about connecting with people and having fun. For others, it was their first time backpacking or hiking in a specific region they wouldn't feel comfortable being alone

in. Hiking and backpacking require a lot of mental strength and tenacity, and [so] being witness to people pushing themselves and then being proud of their accomplishment is incredible."

Cameron Loomis became an ambassador for the Tacoma area shortly after Fiscus joined. As an avid outdoorsman, he found joy in guiding Queer people on some of his favorite hikes in the area.

"[The program] gave me an opportunity to connect with the community and... to work on my leadership skills, because it is a safe space for me as well," Loomis said.

When he plans a hike, Loomis will consider his favorite spots as well as a water component: a waterfall, lake, or river. In July, he led a sunset hike on Mount Rainier.

Connecting with new people is difficult, especially in a space many Queer people are told they do not belong in. The PNW outdoors social climate often favors heteronormativity, but the Washington LGBT+ Outdoors chapter (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/lightoutdoorswa>) could be a great place for Queer people to start to comfortably reconnect with the wonders of nature.

## QLaw to celebrate 15 years during "Falltacular" Queer bash

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

Fifteen years after its founding, the QLaw Foundation will mark a milestone this September with a "Falltacular" celebration at the Sea Mar Community Center, 9635 Des Moines Memorial Drive S., on September 27.

QLaw and the foundation have been deeply intertwined in advocating for Queer issues during state legislative sessions, and offer a variety of services to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities in Washington, including direct legal services, trainings, consultations, advocacy, litigation support, amicus work, and impact litigation.

What QLaw is most proud of, however,

is being a "constant presence for our community and offering support during their most challenging times," according to the website.

Attendees at the celebration can expect gourmet food and drinks, dancing, music, luminaries, performances — and precious stones. Community tickets cost \$35, and general admission tickets are \$125. Discounts are offered for groups. Those who cannot physically attend have the option to view the party remotely free of charge.

For more information, visit <https://www qlawfoundation.org/falltacular>.



# Washington historian authors nominations for two LGBTQ+ landmark sites

BY LAURA JOHNSON



SUSAN FERENTINOS  
PHOTO BY MARTIN BOLLING

Early in her career, Susan Ferentinos worked as a public historian with a personal interest in the LGBTQ+ past. Recently, the Port Townsend-based researcher, widely considered an expert in American Queer history, authored two nominations for landmarks with African American LGBTQ+ significance for the Historical Landmark Nomination Committee meeting in May.

The nominations for the Azurest South in Virginia and Slowe-Burrill House in Washington, DC, mention that both buildings have a place in Black Queer feminist history; in addition, the former has distinctive architectural features.

Ferentinos worked for and with the National Parks Service since 2016 with limited grant funding to compile cases for both buildings to be considered as landmarks. The properties were already included on the national registry of historic places; however, neither site was approved within the lens of their LGBTQ+ impact. When Ferentinos set out to nominate the sites with other National Park historians, she wanted to change the prevailing narrative.

"It was clear to...us that...if we were not convincing people of that, then the failure of that was in my writing, not in the character of the property," she said.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a passionate researcher, Ferentinos considered the nominations to be a personal milestone. She believes that the historical significance of the two sites is

important to Queer history in their own right regardless of their final designations.

The Slowe-Burrill House was owned and occupied from 1922 to 1937 by Lucy Digges Slowe, an African American professor of English and dean of women at Howard University. Slowe, joined by her romantic partner Mary Burrill, was an advocate for racial, gender, and sexuality equality at the university.

Azurest South was designed and occupied by Amaza Lee Meredith from 1939 until 1984. Meredith was an African American professor of architecture at Virginia State University and made undocumented modifications to the building over the decades. Alongside her romantic partner, Edna Meade Colson, she created a refuge for others at their estate. The modernist Azurest South stood out from the surrounding architecture at Virginia State University (where Meredith taught), which features a cookie-cutter federalist style.

"The fact that Amaza Lee Meredith had the vision for a modernist building, and that it was a private residence as opposed to a public space, is pretty distinctive for that place and that time," Ferentinos said.

Azurest South was built directly across from the VSU administrative building, in defiance of the dean. "It was a really rough time to be African American or Queer in Virginia. And the fact that this couple was drawing attention to themselves and really going against the grain by building this property and living in it openly as a couple — I really felt that it was worthy of federal recognition."

Much of the historical landmark nomination was influenced by Jacqueline Taylor's biography of Meredith (titled *Amaza Lee Meredith Imagines Herself Modern*. Published in the fall of 2023, it brought more attention to Azurest South. In the preface, Taylor writes, "Seeing the house for the first time, I was struck by its idiosyncratic character, particularly in this location."



HISTORICAL MARKER NEAR THE DRIVEWAY TO AZUREST SOUTH



SLOWE BURRILL HOUSE

The National Landmark Nomination criteria required Ferentinos to determine how true the building remained to the historical context.

"The trick is determining if it still retains an acceptable amount of integrity," Ferentinos said. She took photos and consulted with experts to make that determination. "That is always a big conversation, and with both of those properties, there had been fairly significant changes.... I was doing the on-the-ground work, but I was hired by the National Park Service, so I had preservation staff who were looking at the photographs I had taken and weighing how

to approach the [issue of] integrity."

Another nomination at the May meeting not authored by Ferentinos pertained to American LGBTQ+ history. The Boulder County Courthouse issued six marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 1975, which inspired national backlash against Gay rights in the late 1970s.

The sites have not yet made it through the full process of becoming National Historical Landmarks. After the May meeting, the recommendation for approval will go to the Parks Service advisory board to be voted on. The final decision is made by Secretary Deb Haaland of the Department of the Interior.

# Pride Across the Bridge seeks to connect LGBTQ+ community on the Eastside

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

Pride Across the Bridge (PAB) is a non-profit that serves 2SLGBTQIA+ people on the Eastside through resources, community-based events, and advocacy efforts, such as pushing the City of Redmond to install its first rainbow crosswalk in 2023. Recurring events are vital for building relationships and trust, and many of PAB's incorporate creative or artistic elements.

"Art is a powerful tool for self-expression, especially within the Queer community. It speaks a universal language that can reach those who feel invisible, offering comfort, validation, and connection. With so much of our community under attack — whether in schools, healthcare, libraries, or simply in our right to exist — art provides a vital outlet," Axton Burton, founder and executive director of PAB, told the SGN.

Years ago, Burton joined an organization that they said claimed to be serving local Queer Eastside residents but discovered that it was run by allies and was "negligently disconnected" from the needs of those it was meant to serve. Burton ended up hosting the Eastside's first Queer holiday potluck, and the overwhelmingly positive response showed them the need for a

safe and affirming space.

"That first event ignited my passion and trust in the community, proving that we could create events led by and for Queer people, and make an immediate impact," Burton said.

## A variety of events

PAB hosts over 250 events per year, serving between ten and 10,000 people, (the number who attended the organization's flagship Redmond Pride festival). Burton said PAB events, which can range from local bakery runs to group skydiving sessions, have appealed to those from the ages of 16 to 95, including those who have a variety of mental and physical abilities.

Redmond Pride showcases Queer-owned businesses, artists, and creators, as well as local Queer performers. This year's had over a hundred vendor applications. Attendees come from Seattle, the Eastside, and surrounding areas. Some take advantage of sensory-friendly areas, like the book nook and the chill zone.

In addition to engaging food trucks, like Kathmandu Momocho and Sugar & Spoon, Burton said PAB felt inspired to highlight



AXTON BURTON IN FRONT OF INTERSEX-INCLUSIVE PROGRESS PRIDE FLAG RIBBON ART  
PHOTO BY GRACE GORENFLO

a local Queer-owned business by having it design the Pride logo and theme. The organization plans to continue this initiative each year.

Angel of Small Death and Kenbie Enby, local performers, steer PAB's DIY Drag Workshop, which Burton said opens a door to the realm of drag for those who may not have access. "Over ten weeks, participants form a drag family, exploring makeup, movement, act creation, and the culture and history of drag," Burton said. "The workshop culminates in one to two performances, offering a supportive space to step into this powerful art form."

Queer Creative Connections is a monthly event in which PAB partners with Bellevue

Public Library, creating a mellow environment where people can work individually or collaboratively on creative projects.

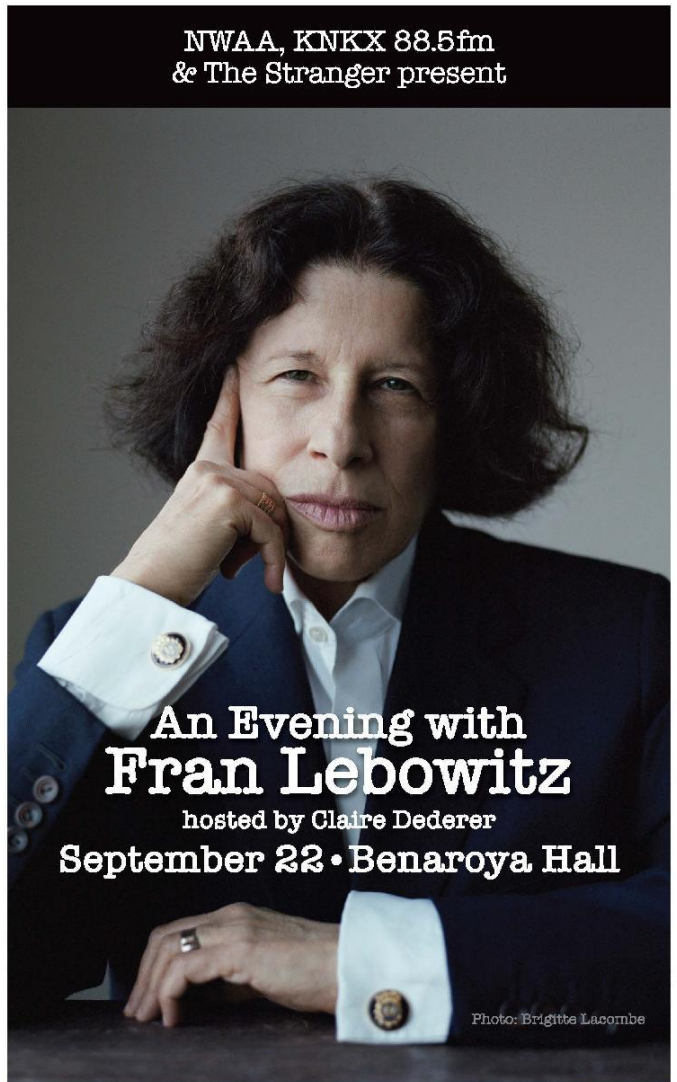
Burton said many in the Queer community have shared experiences of feelings of isolation, and that creative spaces offer a space that's free of judgement, where they can explore their identities, share stories, and connect with others.

"Art fosters empowerment, ignites new experiences and broadens horizons, making it an essential part of our work at PAB, and healing in the greater community," Burton said.

For more information about PAB, visit <https://www.prideacrossthebridge.org>.



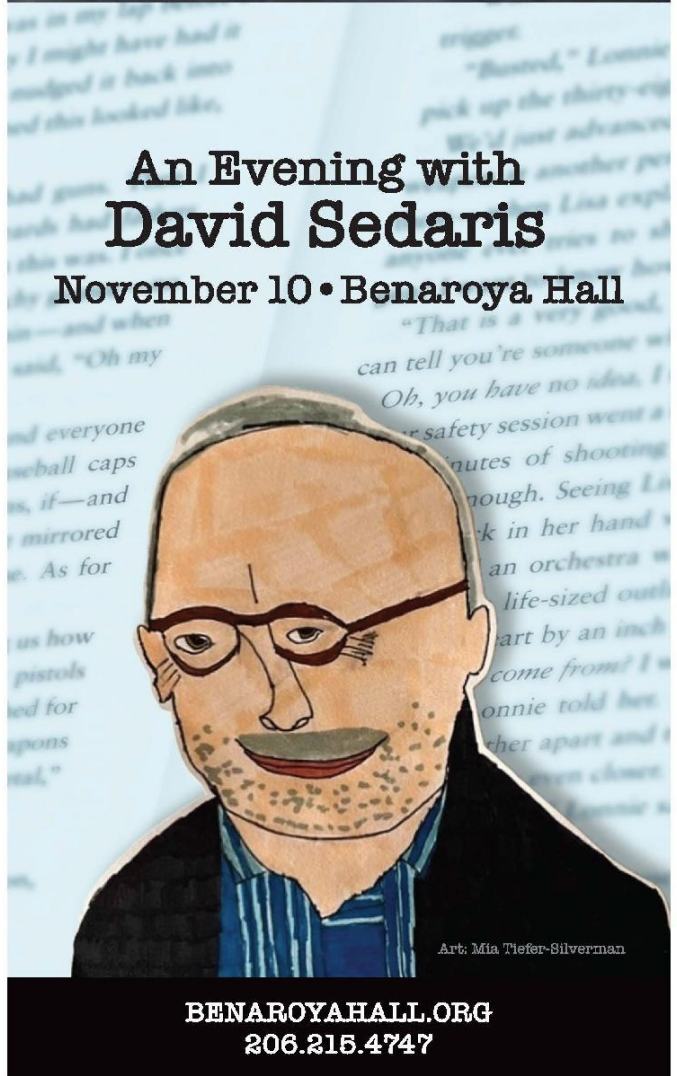
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# Olympia business accused of unfair treatment of Queer employee and community

BY LAURA JOHNSON

On any given day, a slow hum of chatter and clinks of cups fill a local business on Fourth Street in downtown Olympia. Rhythms, an all-ages coffeehouse and live music venue, hosts weekly open-mic night and a full roster of musical guests most evenings. As one of a handful of all-ages venues in the state capital, it strives for an inclusive space for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

However, on the afternoon of July 9, a former employee posted allegations of safety concerns, financial mistreatment, and disrespect of their personal identity against the business on Instagram.

"I feel deceived and used for that relationship being formed and being told that I was their family," Roslyn Winter Echo said, referring to their experience. "I just don't feel like I was treated as family at the end."

## Alleged wage theft

Since Rhythms Coffee opened its doors in April 2022, Winter Echo was part of the action. The full-time sound engineer was employed at Rhythms within the first month and took on additional tasks, which included updating the official website, keeping up with the online presence, booking musicians, and hosting open mics.

"I first started to feel wrong in April last year, when [I noticed] the first paycheck was very short for my hours," Winter Echo recalled. "I did talk to them about that, but that conversation didn't go well. And it was like a lot of others to follow."

Winter Echo said that they addressed their concern privately but felt that the owners did not take them seriously. In the following months, they and the owners of Rhythms engaged in many conversations about these concerns until February of this year, when Winter Echo made the decision to leave. From the October to January, Winter Echo said they did not receive their promised wage at all.

"I was told it was going to be here anytime. Those couple of months, it was a huge challenge. I was stressed," Winter

Echo said. During that time, they relied on FBT, a state benefit used to purchase food and other essentials.

## Concerns for community safety

Despite the personal financial stress, Winter Echo emphasized that their main concern was the safety of the space. "I can put the financial grievances aside, but like, at the end of the day, it is just inexcusable to have safety not being taken care of," they said.

A few musicians, patrons, and employees, Winter Echo among them, expressed concern about the owners' lack of action regarding other patrons exhibiting inappropriate behavior toward minors and young people in the all-ages space.

"I understand that this could all be wrong and that it could be all false by some chance, but I would rather sacrifice losing one customer than potentially this person finding more victims within an all-ages space," Saige Stittsworth, a musician and long-time customer of Rhythms, stated.

Stittsworth led the charge to kick out patrons who made the space less than safe. A particular patron was banned from another all-ages space in Centralia last year, and when that person began to show up to Rhythms again, Stittsworth took action.

"I loved Rhythms so much at this moment, and I wanted to do this to help, and be like, 'We can do this, we can kick people out,'" he said, remembering talking to one owner. "'You guys have the ability to do that as the owners.'" The patron was removed by Stittsworth and the owner, but he and his friends, including Winter Echo, were not convinced that the issue would be taken seriously in the future.

After Winter Echo's social media post, Stittsworth posted a response a day later to support his friend and encourage the original post to be addressed by the owners. He also wanted to clarify that both he and Winter Echo were not calling for a boycott; rather, their goal was to encour-



ROSLYN ON PIANO AT RHYTHMS COURTESY OF ARTIST

age change within a community space they value.

"I hope I have given Kim and David [the owners] the keys to fix these issues that have been there. So now that it's public, there should not be any other option but to fix them. And I really hope that Rhythms can fix them."

## Disrespecting identity

During their time at Rhythms, Winter Echo came out as Nonbinary and asked the Rhythms community to refer to them with the correct pronouns. When the owners neglected to honor the request, Winter Echo "felt like the respect for me was dwindling."

Winter Echo's friends noticed the owners not using the correct pronouns in conversations, even when corrected.

"Speaking as a Transgender man, it hurts me to see them use [Winter Echo's] identity as a weapon," Stittsworth said about the treatment.

Winter Echo and Stittsworth recalled a time when one of the owners announced a musician using the wrong pronouns. When she was corrected privately, the owner shrugged off the opportunity to make a correction.

Winter Echo and Stittsworth, along with many of their friends, have yet to return to Rhythms but continue to encourage people to make their own informed decisions.

## Queer event cancellation

When Winter Echo posted about their experience, Rhythms Coffee was met with ramifications from the Queer community.

Stonewall Youth, an Olympia-based organization that gives Queer youth tools to make smart decisions through education, was set to host its second Queeraoke event at Rhythms on July 12. On July 10, one day after Winter Echo's post, the organization canceled the event.

Kenn Anderson, the organization's community fundraising and outreach director, wrote a statement asking Rhythms to address the post. "We wanted to take those seriously and [err] on the safer side and make sure that we weren't giving our support or affiliation to a business that didn't align with our values," Anderson stated.

Queeraoke moved to Stonewall Youth's own event space at the last minute. Anderson said the change of venue still brought many youth attendees; however, most donors to similar events are adults. Despite the loss of revenue, Anderson was proud to have stuck with the organization's values.

"It is very important to us that youth are paid fairly for their labor," Anderson said. "Everyone should be paid for their labor, but youth especially tend to be given the short end of the stick on that."

Rhythms Coffee declined to comment for this story.

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# Hope ignites the party at the 2024 DNC

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON  
SGN STAFF WRITER

KAMALA HARRIS  
ALL DNC PHOTOS BY NATE GOWDY

There's a strange feeling of warmth and excitement fizzing in the hearts of Democrats, a feeling many young voters have yet to experience: hope. On July 21, President Joe Biden, announced that he would end his quest for reelection and instead endorse his vice president, Kamala Harris. The party quickly rallied around Harris, who raised tens of millions within days of launching her campaign. On August 6, she announced her running mate: Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. Since then, the good times just seem to keep rolling, as the Democratic ticket has gotten a bump in the polls in addition to the wave of cash.

### Convention speakers

On August 19, the Democratic National Convention got underway in Chicago. What just a month before was looking to be

a somber wake for the party's prospects in the November election erupted instead into the party of the year. The first night saw President Biden giving a well-rehearsed speech, passing the torch to his VP and highlighting the success of his administration. Other speakers drew cheers and "Thank you, Joe" chants with praise for Biden's "selfless" decision to bow out of the race, laced with critical words for GOP nominee Donald Trump, taking particular aim at his dishonesty on the campaign trail, policy positions, and character flaws.

The convention continued on Tuesday night with even higher emotions. Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, who will be the first First Gentleman if Harris is elected in November, used humor to tell the story of his courtship with Harris and painted the VP (also a former prosecutor, state attorney

general, and US senator) as a doting stepmother to his children, who affectionately refer to her as "Momala." (Harris has been criticized by Republicans for not having biological children of her own.)

Emhoff was followed on stage by Democratic darling Michelle Obama, the former First Lady. Many viewers noted that her 2024 speech was strikingly different from her 2016 "when they go low, we go high" remarks. She did not tiptoe around Trump's character, and she even explicitly called out the former president for his racism. "For years, Donald Trump did everything in his power to try to make people fear us," she said. "His limited and narrow view of the world made him feel threatened by the existence of two hardworking, highly educated, successful people who also happened to be Black."

She later recalled a moment from Trump's blundering appearance at the National Black Journalists Association — the same event in which he claimed Kamala Harris "became Black" — when he claimed that immigrants were "taking Black jobs."

"Who's going to tell him that the job he's currently seeking might just be one of those 'Black jobs?'" the former First Lady said as the room erupted in laughter and cheers.

Taking the stage after his wife, former President Barack Obama leaned into his classic charm and humor, getting jabs in at Trump while also reminding voters of the dangers a second Trump term could hold. "We don't need four more years of bluster and chaos," he said. "We've seen that movie. And we all know that the sequel is usually worse."





**The candidates speak**

Night three of the DNC brought the party. Harris's VP pick, Gov. Walz, gave a zesty speech highlighting his Midwestern values, knocking the GOP candidates for their "weird" behavior, and providing a broad roadmap of Democratic policies, including cutting taxes for the middle class.

During his speech, cameras cut often to Walz's wife and two children, standing and clapping with tears in their eyes. Clips of his son, Gus, who has a nonverbal learning disorder, wiping tears from his eyes and saying "that's my dad" quickly went viral across the internet. However, the videos also earned some disdain from Republicans, who were quick to make snide remarks at the expense of the 17-year-old.

While Walz's speech was certainly one of the most memorable of the convention, other big names roused conventioners and viewers at home, including Hillary and Bill Clinton; Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Hakeem Jeffries, and Nancy Pelosi; Sens. Bernie Sanders, Amy Klobuchar, Rafael Warnock, and Tammy Duckworth; Govs. Josh Shapiro, Andy Beshear, Gretchen Whitmer, and Wes Moore; and First Lady Jill Biden. Nonpoliticians who spoke or performed included poet Amanda Gorman, Jason Isbell, John Legend, and Stevie Wonder, not to mention surprise speaker Oprah Winfrey.

Repeating much of the event's overarching theme of hope, they exuded warmth and happiness when referring to Harris, officially accepted the party's nomination on Thursday evening with a much-anti-

ipated speech introducing herself to much of the nation.

The convention also included a ceremonial roll call of the states (the official roll call was conducted earlier in the month), MC'ed by DJ Cassidy. With each state was called, he spun a song embodying its spirit. Representatives took the mic to highlight some of their state's proudest accomplishments and reasons for supporting behind Harris.

With "Can't Hold Us" by Macklemore and Ryan Lewish playing in the background, Shasti Conrad, the first South Asian woman to lead a state party, pledged Washington's delegates.

"From the amber waves of grain and to the burning orange orchards of Eastern Washington to the iconic waters of the Salish Sea, Washington stands proud as part of the blue wall," she said, surrounded by delegates from Washington state, including US Rep. Pramila Jayapal.

Washington also sent several uncommitted delegates to the convention. Thirty-six uncommitted delegates were sent to the DNC in total, all of whom are protesting US aid to Israel. Washington's wore "No More Bombs" pins and writing on their hands but did not participate in any of the protests outside the convention.

Though there are just two months left until the general election on November 5, there is still plenty of time for big surprises and unexpected twists. While the word "unprecedented" seems to ring hollow now, this election truly has been one for the books (let's just hope they don't get banned).



BARACK AND MICHELLE OBAMA EMBRACE



CELEBRITY DRAG QUEEN BENDELACREME



WASHINGTON'S DELEGATION TO THE DNC CAUGHT NATIONAL ATTENTION WEARING LIGHT-UP COWBOY HATS AND SASHES THAT SAY "COWBOY KAMALA"



OUTSIDE THE DNC, GAZA WAR PROTESTERS MARCH

# Primary results provide potential preview of November elections

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON  
SGN STAFF WRITER

Procrastinators from across Washington state flocked to mailboxes on August 6 to deposit their votes for the primary election. On Broadway, on Capitol Hill, activists beat drums, passed out stickers, and encouraged potential voters with chants of "You've got 'til eight, don't be late!"

As always, King County received the most ballots cast of any county in the state, totaling 566,007, just above 40% of registered voters.

## Federal offices

Maria Cantwell showed significant support, indicating her good chance of retaining the position of U.S. senator. In the primary, she secured 74.5% of the votes in King County and 57.2% of statewide votes. The closest candidate to Cantwell's impressive lead was Dr. Raul Garcia of the GOP, with 13.14% of the county vote and 22.13% of state votes. Both will appear on the ballot in November.

Suzan DelBene also held a significant lead in her race for the 1st Congressional District, with 63% of the statewide vote. DelBene's campaign has focused on improving jobs and the economy while providing essential care to the elderly and veterans.

Trailing far behind her, it was a close race for second, with five Republican candidates splitting the vote. A slight plurality voted in favor of Jeb Brewer over the rest of the field, though with under 1,000 votes separating Brewer and Orion Webster, second place could remain subject to change.

Considering the amount of advertisement she invested into her campaign, it is not a surprise that Primila Jayapal will head into the November 7th Congressional District race with a significant lead in the primary,

earning nearly 80% of the vote in King County, far ahead of all other challengers. Jayapal has run her campaign on prioritizing civil rights, public safety, and criminal justice reform, and enriching local arts.

The 8th Congressional District primary witnessed a much closer race between incumbent Democrat Kim Schrier and Carmen Goers of the GOP. Schrier did pull ahead with 58.2% of the vote in King County (50.11% in the whole district), but Goers only trails by 5% districtwide. Schrier currently serves on the congressional health and energy committees and has focused her campaign on broad, sweeping issues. Goers has narrowed in on the culture wars and has made education reform as a high priority in her campaign.

The 9th Congressional District saw Democrat Adam Smith emerge as the clear frontrunner, with 53.85% of the vote. Still, surprisingly, Democrat Melissa Chaudhry earned the second-highest percentage of voters in the race, topping the closest Republican by just 2% (20.66% vs. 18.21%), or under 4,000 votes. Smith chairs the House Armed Services Committee and is a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Chaudhry has established herself as a political outsider, highlighting her experiences as an immigrant and person of color while also claiming that Smith is funded by war profiteers.

## State results

With a long list of candidates to fill the vacant governor's seat, campaigning has become contentious in recent months. The predicted frontrunners still include Attorney General Bob Ferguson, Mark Mullet, Dave Reichert, and Semi Bird. While Ferguson



PHOTO BY TED WARREN / AP

and Mullet received much better results in King County than their competitors, the state seems to favor a tight race between Ferguson and Reichert. If Reichert were to win, he'd be the first Republican governor of Washington state since the mid-1980s.

Ferguson has placed a high priority on improving public access to mental health resources in Washington. He is best known for numerous lawsuits as attorney general, including against a florist who refused to serve a same-sex couple and against the Trump "Muslim ban" in 2017. He has faced pushback from some on the far left who see his promises to increase the number of police officers and state troopers as counter to promoting safety on Washington's streets. However, his main competitor, Dave Reichert, is a former sheriff and favors increasing police throughout the state.

While early reporting from NPR indicated that an influx in Democratic candidates had potentially split the vote in some races, like that for Commissioner of Public Lands, in the favor of Republican candidates, late tallies now indicate that Democrat Dave Upthegrove may have secured

just enough votes to advance to the November ballot. His Facebook page posted the following on August 19: "Now that every county has certified the election results, I am excited to finish in second place and begin my general election campaign! The 51-vote margin of victory [over Republican Sue Kuehel Pederson, out of 1,903,073 votes] will trigger an automatic statewide hand recount, but our campaign is moving full speed ahead toward November."

Upthegrove, Allen Lebovitz, Patrick DePoe, Jaralee Anderson, and Kevin Van De Wege, all Democrats, may have pulled liberal voters in multiple directions by offering similar campaigns built on conservation and environmental justice.

Republican Jaime Herrera Beutler had with the most votes, at 22%.

Ballots for Washington's general election will be sent out on October 18. Voters have until Election Day, November 5, to register to vote in the upcoming general election, and they will have until 8 p.m. of the same day to deposit ballots into official drop boxes located around each county, or have them postmarked that day or earlier.

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<p><b>Jumaane Smith Quintet</b> New Album Celebration <i>Come On Home</i> SEPTEMBER 16 Seattle born and bred powerhouse trumpeter with an irresistibly creative voice - performed on 5 Grammy-winning records!</p>	<p><b>Ray Parker Jr., Jim Peterik, David Pack &amp; Mindi Abair perform for In Concert for Cancer's 13th Annual Benefit Show</b> OCTOBER 7</p>
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WING LUKE MUSEUM



## I went to the Wildrose so you don't have to... but maybe you should

BY ALAN MOTLEY

There's a first time for everything, right? I've partied in every type of Gay bar you can imagine, from high-glam drag clubs to grungy dive bars where the bathrooms are more questionable than the men. But until now, I had never set foot in Seattle's one and only Lesbian bar: the Wildrose.

So I decided to throw caution (and my preconceived notions) to the wind and venture into this bastion of Sapphic celebration.

### First impressions: The atmosphere

Walking into the Wildrose, I was immediately struck by how different the vibe was compared to the bars I usually frequent. No shirtless go-go boys gyrating to a thumping techno beat here — this place had a distinctly chill, almost nostalgic feel. The lighting was dim but inviting, with strings of fairy lights casting a warm glow over the cozy space. The decor screamed, "We've been around since the '80s, and we're proud of it!" Think faded concert posters, old-school arcade games, and a jukebox that probably still takes quarters.

The crowd was a mix of the expected and the unexpected. Yes, there were plenty of flannel-clad women, but there were also couples on date night, solo drinkers, and even a few straight folks who had clearly been let in on the secret that the Wildrose isn't just for Lesbians — it's for anyone who wants to have a good time without judgment.

### The drinks: Strong and cheap — just how I like 'em

Let's talk about the drinks because, let's be honest, that's why most of us go to bars in the first place. The Wildrose is not one of those trendy spots where you'll find artisanal cocktails with ingredients you can't pronounce. No, this place keeps it simple: strong pours of classic drinks at prices that won't make you regret your life choices the next morning.

As a tequila and grapefruit drink lover,

I was pleasantly surprised by how the bartenders nailed my go-to. The mix was just right: tart with a kick, and exactly what I needed to get into the groove.

The bartenders were friendly and efficient, and I appreciated that they weren't trying to upsell me on some fancy concoction. The vibe was very much "here's your drink, now go enjoy yourself." And enjoy I did.

### The entertainment: A night with the resident DJs

Now, let's get to the heart of the matter: the music. I made my Wildrose debut on a Saturday night, a prime time to experience what the bar has to offer. The resident DJ was spinning an eclectic mix that ranged from throwback hits to modern pop anthems, and the dance floor was alive with energy. You know that feeling when the right song comes on, and you can't help but move? That's what Friday and Saturday nights at the Wildrose are all about.

The crowd was a joyful mix: people who clearly knew each other well and newcomers like me who were welcomed into the fold. The best part? No pretension. Just pure, unfiltered fun.

### The people: Friendly faces and good vibes

One of the best things about the Wildrose is the people. As a Gay man in a Lesbian bar, I wasn't sure what kind of reception I'd get. Would I be seen as an interloper, a curiosity, or just another guy trying to be "woke"? I'm happy to report that none of those fears were realized. The patrons were some of the friendliest people I've encountered in the Seattle bar scene.

I struck up conversations with a few regulars, and they were more than happy to share their love for the place. One woman told me she'd been coming for over a decade and had met some of her closest friends there. Another shared how impor-

tant it was to have a safe space where she could be herself without any pretense. It was clear that the Wildrose isn't just a bar — it's a community.

### Why you should go: Celebrating 40 years of history and heart

So, why should you go to the Wildrose? Because it's a place that's more than the sum of its parts. It's not just about the drinks, the entertainment, or the ambiance — it's about the sense of belonging you feel when you walk through the door. In a city where Gay bars seem to come and go with the seasons, the Wildrose has stood the test of time, and for good reason.

Having opened its doors in 1984, it's one of the oldest Lesbian bars in the country. That's four decades of being a safe haven, a meeting place, and a home away from home for countless people. For all that time, it's been a vital part of Seattle's LGBTQ+ history, and it continues to be a cornerstone of the community.

### Conclusion: My takeaway

So, there you have it. I went to the Wildrose so you don't have to. But honestly? You really should. Whether you're a Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, straight, or somewhere in between, it's a place where everyone is welcome. It's a bar with heart, history, and a heck of a lot of character.

Plus, where else in Seattle are you going to find a place that's been rocking out since the '80s and still knows how to show you a good time?

### September nights: Your guide to Capitol Hill's hottest Gay bars and events

Capitol Hill is the beating heart of Seattle's LGBTQ+ scene, and this September, it's the place to be. Whether you go for drag, dancing, or just a chill night with friends, it has something for everyone this September. Don't miss out!

Here's your ultimate guide to the must-attend events at the neighborhood's top Gay bars:

### Queer/Bar

**September 6–7:** Legendary drag icon Raja Gemini  
**September 20:** *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 16 winner Nymphla Wind  
**September 27:** The electrifying Lady Camden

### The Cuff Complex

Rotating dance nights throughout the month  
 Lively midweek karaoke sessions

### Neighbours

**Sundays:** Long-running "Kandela" Latin night

### Massive Club

High-octane electronic and techno music events (details TBA)

### Pony

Themed dance parties channeling the spirit of a 1970s Gay bar  
**Wednesdays:** All-night happy hour



# The return of Our Fest: A festival for Seattle's "Grrrls, Queers, and POC"

BY KYLIN BROWN

JANE DON'T  
ALL OUR FEST PHOTOS BY KYLIN BROWN

On July 27, glowing LED strips lit the descent into Madame Lou's as punk rockers, drag queens, and a steady crowd revived "Our Fest," a music festival not seen in five years.

The brainchild of Erin Doyle, the first rendition of Our Fest took place in April 2019 as "a celebration of Grrrls, Queers, POC in the Seattle punk music scene." This year's festival maintained and sharpened this focus, aiming to highlight artists and bring people of the same communities together again. Though it was a more humble revival of the 2019 debut, which spanned two days and two stages in Black Lodge and the now-closed Victory Lounge, a similarly sized crowd remained steady throughout the evening.

As the lead singer and an electric guitarist of the "power pop punk" band Three Fingers, Doyle said she's been able to organize both editions of Our Fest through connections she's made in the scene.

Doyle, who is also a pediatric critical-care transfer-center nurse, chose to postpone the latest Our Fest in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic but says she "persistently planned" its return each year since,

determined to fill a gap she's observed in Seattle's music festival scene for Queer punk artists.

"There are a lot of local festivals, and they're awesome, but I feel like our scene has amazing diversity, and at the time [in 2019] I wasn't seeing that super reflected," Doyle said.

According to Doyle, the Seattle punk scene is "finally on its way back to life" since the onset of the pandemic. "This year is the first year that I've seen everyone really back in action again," she said.

### Wide range of styles

Donning a pleather trash-bag mmidress and matching purse, Doyle spoke with *SGN* while setting up the Three Fingers merch table and coordinating with sound and lights.

"As a Queer person and a performer myself, I have been lucky to book my friends' bands and bands that I love for Our Fest," she said.

This year's band lineup consisted of Prisma, Pyramid Scream, Torch, Miss Prince, and Doyle's own Three Fingers, plus a drag showcase hosted by Jane Don't and featuring Rowan Ruthless, Diamond

Lil, Issa Man, Jizzuhbell, and Mimi Gina.

Pyramid Scream, a self-described "surf Gay/yuckpop" trio, launched the night with sometimes-screaming, sometimes-soothing lyrics covering topics from high school angst and Bisexual love to "crapitalism" and climate disaster.

Throughout the lineup, a similarly winding thread of punk and Queer expres-

sion connected a wide range of musical styles and artistry, and the ready audience stirred at every chance for a mosh or headbang.

Community spirit also proved strong among bands, for example when Prisma's guest guitarist, Dylan Walsh, broke a string, and Pyramid Scream produced a loaner guitar without hesitation.



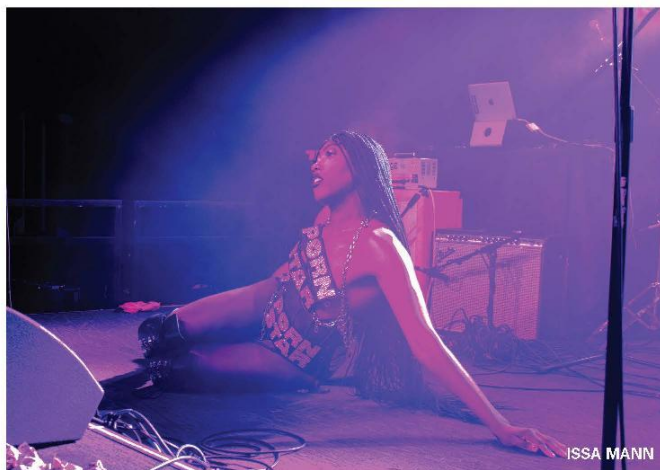
PRISMA



MIMI GINA



ROWAN RUTHLESS



ISSA MANN

### Drag in the mix

While the 2019 rendition of Our Fest saw a lineup of over 15 musical performances, its 2024 return added drag to the bill. According to host Jane Don't, who served as a band manager in the scene "in a previous life," Our Fest's invitation was warmly welcomed.

"A lot of the time in punk spaces, it is still dominated by cis white men," she said. "So anything that you can do to sort of decentralize that is absolutely needed. Any chance to bring drag into a nontraditional space, I'm here for it."

Jane Don't also shared a sentiment reminiscent of '80s punk RuPaul. "Drag is inherently punk," she said, referring to historic solidarity between the two communities and their shared love of music and DIY art.

Doyle expressed her gratitude for every-

one involved, including Big Mario's, which donated pizza for all of the performers and staff involved, on-site tattoo and tooth gem vendors Knife Knight and Brows by Sage, respectively, and Liquid Death, whose canned water helped "murder thirst" for attendees all night long alongside Madame Lou's bar staff.

Looking ahead, Doyle said she hopes to establish Our Fest as an annual event and continue to bring out a diverse lineup representative of the Queer and punk community in and around Seattle.

Catch Doyle's next event, the Three Fingers "Jam Packed" record release show, with LipStitch and Jaguar Paw, on Sept. 20 at the Kraken Bar & Lounge, and stay tuned for news from Our Fest on Instagram at @ourfestseattle.



PYRAMID SCREAM



## Award-winning Queer folk-pop musician to tour PNW this fall

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

JOHNNY HILAND 3 AND FRIENDS FEATURING CHRISTIE LENÉE  
PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK



CHRISTIE LENÉE  
PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Five years after winning an "Acoustic Guitar of the Year" award, guitarist and singer-songwriter Christie Lenée will tour the Pacific Northwest to showcase her most recent album, *Coming Alive*.

Lenée's music ranges from folk-pop bops to instrumentals, and she incorporates pop lyrics with catchy hooks that flow with her melodies. Some would describe Lenée as a cross between Joni Mitchell, Dave Matthews, and Michael Hedges. Her most popular song on Spotify is "Sterling Highway," released in 2019, with over 92,000 listens.

*Coming Alive* is Lenée's sixth studio album. It tells a story of hope and joy, self-confidence and empowerment.

"I felt like a caged animal releasing myself into freedom," Lenée wrote on her website. "I'd been hibernating in a log cabin in the mountains in complete isolation during spring and summer of 2020. In

that, there was a feeling of how incredible it would be to get back into the world again."

Lenée, who identifies as Queer, released *Coming Alive* in 2022, having collaborated with several talented musicians on the album, like drummer Keith Carlock of Steely Dan and keyboardist Charlie Lowell of Jars of Clay. The album also contains a track called "Coming Alive," in which the first verse goes as follows:

I've got a feeling deep inside  
I'm coming  
Coming alive  
Deep in this body of water  
There's a tide taking me on a ride  
I'm coming alive.

Lenée said she felt like she was traveling in the song during the creation process, in which she used a 12-string guitar. The

musician said it felt like the song helped her find something powerful within her, and that she experienced a new form of self-discovery.

"This is a song of getting back out into the wild. There is a sense of trusting the self that all will be well when taking massive leaps of faith, listening to the call of the soul and discovering all that you are," Lenée said.

Lenée will perform a total of six shows in Washington, September 10-15, including at Rainshadow Recording in Port Townsend, Dusty Strings and the Royal Room in Seattle, and Hamilton Studio in Spokane. She will then briefly travel to Portland and Bend prior to finishing her tour in California.

For more information, visit <https://christielenée.com>.



# Emerald City Kings Ball

## Three nights of artistic wonder and empowerment

BY MATT NAGLE  
SGN EDITOR

SHERWOOD RYDER (LEFT) AND JABRIEL GAYMESS DEVELOPED THE KINGS BALL CONCEPT WHILE TRADING IDEAS IN A DRESSING ROOM ONE EVENING. COURTESY EMERALD CITY KINGS BALL

A galaxy of drag kings and beings will light up the stage for three nights at the Emerald City Kings Ball, Sept. 19, 20, and 21 at West Seattle's Skylark Café & Club (3803 Delridge Way SW).

Nights one and two will showcase performers sharing their unique artistry, and night three will feature a competition among a whole new set of hopefuls vying for the titles of High King Supreme, Imperial Duke, and Grand Marquis.

Headliners this year are Krème Inakuchi (Toronto) for the first night, Riley Popseyed (Columbus, Ohio) for the second, and Papi Churro (Oakland, CA) for the night three competition, who, as the reigning High King Supreme, will do a step-down performance as the new monarch is crowned.

Tickets are going fast, and some ticketing options having already sold out, which shows how hungry people are to experience kings from near and far onstage in an event just for them.

"As of right now, there are other kings showcases happening throughout the country and the world, but from our understanding and our research, we are the only drag king festival in the world," said co-founder Sherwood Ryder (a stage name).

"At the Kings Ball, you have people leaving questioning their sexuality, crying and feeling connected for the first time, [or] laughing their ass off because somebody has done something mind-blowingly hilarious. There are just so many different facets of kings, and at the Kings Ball, it's our goal to showcase and highlight all of it."

### A dressing-room dream

Ryder and fellow performer Jabriel Gaymess developed the concept for the Kings Ball while chatting in a dressing room. With media manager and associate producer Harley Sayne also on board, the three "have tackled this monster, and we're feeding it well, hoping it will grow into something beautiful," as Ryder stated.

This trio knows all too well the lack of spaces for drag kings and beings, something they are out to change for current and future Queer generations.

"Everything is very heavily queen dominated, and even recent drag festivals that have popped up are still... There isn't a whole lot of space for drag kings," Sherwood said. "They're not showcased or highlighted as much, and if they are, let's be real — they're like the token king in a cast full of queens. Normally it's the same sort of rotation and the same three to four kings that are put on bigger stages, at bigger events, and at bigger bars. We need something more."

With the ball happening each Septem-

ber, an application period for performers normally opens around February or April. After a little over a month, it closes, then a team goes through the applications, sends out acceptances, and creates an alternatives list and a wait list.

"Everybody can apply," Sherwood said. "We have kings from all over North America coming, from Canada and the US, and our goal is to reach beyond those borders and bring in kings from other countries as well."

### Tapping into masculinity, empowering youth

Ryder will be taking the stage on the ball's second night. A seasoned performer, he started out as a go-go dancer and entered the burlesque scene around 2012.

"Six years after doing burlesque, I wanted to develop a masculine persona character, and that's how Sherwood Ryder came to be," he said. "The name came to

me in high school, so [I'd] been holding onto that name for many years when Sherwood Ryder was actually born."

Ryder debuted at the popular Lesbian bar My Sister's Room in Atlanta and the rest, as they say, is history.

"I loved being able to tap into my masculinity. Growing up in a Latin Hispanic household, there is so much machismo involved and [a] need to be this high-femme persona all the time. Being able to tap into this masculinity helps me to develop my own gender identity, so now I'm Nonbinary genderfluid. That's what makes me happy, being able to showcase that other side of me and now embracing it for everyday life, which is really nice."

Being a role model for youth comes with the territory, and Sherwood is touched and humbled by it, relating how a young person said to him at an all-ages show, "I didn't know I could do that, and I want to do that one day."

"I immediately started crying because that's why we do it," Sherwood said. "Artistic expression and freedom are great, but empowerment is a whole other thing, and showcasing that is what makes my heart happy."

### Getting bigger

The Emerald City Kings Ball began in Seattle as a two-night showcase in the style of an old-school Atlanta Players Ball but for drag kings.

As Sherwood explained, "People showed up and wanted more. We had feedback that this needs to happen more often, [and that] other kings wanted to be involved, and that's when we realized that it needed to be bigger."

The Emerald City Kings Ball is indeed getting bigger — so big that it's fast outgrowing its venue. This is why nights sell out quickly.

Sherwood said the Skylark has been a true family for everyone involved in the ball and that it's rather bittersweet to one day have to move on, so that more performers and ticketholders can be accommodated.

"The Skylark is incredible. We love them. They have done everything for us since we started with them last year," Sherwood said. "They have been a staple in the community, not just for everybody in West Seattle but for the Queer community... Cookie Couture hosts and all-ages event there, West End Girls, drag bingo... They host open mic nights for anybody, and a lot of kids go there to perform for the first time."

Unfortunately, the Skylark is being forced to relocate due to Sound Transit's light rail plans for the area. A public fundraiser is underway at <https://givebutter.com/LeisMoveTheSkylark>, where donations are gratefully accepted.

Looking to the future, Sherwood named several goals he wants to achieve personally and professionally. For the ball, continuing to grow and influencing others like it to sprout are two big aims.

"Our goal is to become an international destination sensation for kings and queens alike. I want this to be the catalyst for the start of something new," he said. "I don't want us to be the only one. I want to start putting kings on the map more. I want us to inspire people, to showcase all the new kings who are up-and-coming, to [help them] see themselves on a stage — kings thriving and doing their thing all over and not just [in] the one space that we built."

Learn more about the Emerald City Kings Ball on Facebook or Instagram and at <https://linktr.ee/emeraldcitykingsball>.



HARLEY SANE IS PART OF THE KINGS BALL TEAM BRINGING THE EVENT TO THE SKYLARK. COURTESY EMERALD CITY KINGS BALL





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Jasmine Joshua founded Reboot Theatre about a decade ago while pregnant with twin daughters — a time when they didn't want to give up theatre, but weren't sure when they'd reenter the acting arena.

"I was not out yet when I founded [it], so I actually like to think of Reboot as one of my breadcrumbs when I look back and go, 'Ah, that made sense,'" Joshua told the *SGN*.

Joshua reached out to their social network in 2014 to see if people would be interested in putting on a living-room performance from *1776*, and the community came together to build costumes and design the set. It became the nation's first fully realized, all-female production of the musical.

"I had never produced anything before, but it just started coming together, because people were so excited about this concept, and it kind of just became," Joshua said.

Nowadays, Reboot — which "tests new interpretations of established works through nontraditional casting, design, and methods yet to be discovered" — stands as a Queer hub in Seattle's International District for performers and lovers of musicals and drag.

Joshua loves creating relationships between the audience and performers, including herself. She said that acting and performing on stage is a passion she will always pursue.

"Acting is my first love in theatre," Joshua said. "I love being an actor... For most of my life, I didn't really know who I was, and thinking about [that] was painful and confusing. When you're acting, you're not you,



## Reboot Theatre tries new interpretations of classic works through nontraditional casting

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

COURTESY PHOTO

and you can be anybody — that is freeing and amazing."

### Upcoming productions

Reboot's upcoming production, *Damn Yankees*, is a sporty musical comedy based on the novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*, by Douglass Wallop and George Abbot. The tale follows Joe Boyd, a middle-aged baseball mega-fan who trades his

soul to the devil for an opportunity to steer his favorite team to victory in a pennant race against the New York Yankees.

*Damn Yankees* seemed like the perfect pick for Reboot to experiment with new casting efforts. "It's exciting [to see] how much can we change the context to make it something different," Joshua said.

While different show licenses have various rules about what a theater company can

and cannot do, Joshua finds it interesting to portray an all-women's baseball league, and wonders how that will change the story, which engages in sexism.

"This version doesn't have to be the definitive version. Theater isn't a museum, and that's what makes it the best," Joshua said.

For their next theater venture, Joshua is focusing on what it means to be an older Queer person in a community and world that are changing.

"I've written a... Nonbinary musical about what it's like to come out as an adult, and it has a lot of intergenerational queerness," Joshua said, adding that they want it to be a feel-good identity-crisis piece that's comical and not just sad or traumatic. It will focus on what happens after a person discovers something new about themselves in their thirties and forties.

Joshua said Seattle has a bustling number of talented playwrights, but continues to lose space to put up new works. "This is my first time independently producing something. The bigger houses unfortunately are slimming down. Next year, I'm excited to bring this show and to dispel this notion that putting up new works is hard, [and hope] that everyone is going to come to see this."

They said they will provide updates about the upcoming production, scheduled for next June.

*Damn Yankees will be performed September 6–21 at the Theatre Off Jackson (409 Seventh Ave., Seattle). For more information, visit <https://RebootTheatre.org>.*

Although now she has decades of experience in the theater industry, Intiman Theatre's artistic director since 2017, Jennifer Zeyl, first found her love for storytelling at a young age.

"What my family did for entertainment when I was a child was my father read to us, and he read a little bit of everything," Zeyl told the *SGN*, including Agatha Christie, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Zeyl said she hasn't seen all the film adaptations of these classics, because she didn't grow up with television and she had already envisioned what they looked like in her head, and used to draw as her father read to her.

"I'm entirely sure that that is the reason I'm a set designer," she added.

As the daughter of a Dutch national, Zeyl grew up in a small Amsterdam suburb, and spent her summer months traveling to France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Greece. Her parents were academics, so she spent much of her time in cultural institutions, including museums.

Using her distinct background to her advantage, Zeyl won a Stranger Genius Award in 2006 for her original design for the production of *Crave*. Written by renowned English playwright Sarah Kane, the play about loss, love, sex, and desire was one of the Washington Ensemble Theatre's first productions.

Zeyl said Intiman is revisiting *Crave* early next year, which originally launched the careers of several actors, including Roger Bennigton, Marya Sea Kaminski and Marc Kennison, and also is bringing



## Intiman's Jennifer Zeyl: Updating past projects and supporting new cabaret

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

PHOTO COURTESY  
INTIMAN THEATRE

many of the original cast members back.

"It's four different voices of a very fractured personality, sort of in concert, and sometimes that is an argument, and sometimes that is an agreement. Sometimes it's in love, very sexy," Zeyl said. "It's truly, truly horrifying, but it's a very compelling piece that speaks to inner turmoil, mental

health, and loneliness."

While Zeyl is unsure of the set design for this piece, she plans to make improvements to it from last time.

### Becoming Seattle's spot for cabaret

Intiman will also present a Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*, as well as cabaret

shows. Its fall cabaret lineup includes Justin Huertas' *Triple Fire Sign*, which was exclusively created for the theater.

Zeyl said there was intentionality around presenting and supporting new performance ideas.

"A lot of these are acts that would be at Re-bar if Re-bar was still going," Zeyl said. "The loss of that as a venue — as a space to experiment and a trusted brand — hits really, really hard. A lot of early career opportunities...or for an established artist to try something different, those experimental spaces kind of dried up too."

Cabaret shows have become increasingly hard to put on due to costs, and Zeyl has been seeing many performers moving to Arizona in particular. Detroit and Pittsburgh are other cities Zeyl listed as cabaret hot spots.

"We're trying to provide a bit of a [stop-loss] to the attrition. A lot of midcareer artists are leaving Seattle, because the stakes are so high for what they might want to try with their work. They also have to be a fundraiser — they have to market it." If Seattle is going to retain artists, Zeyl said the city must find ways for them to financially survive without worrying about closures.

"We have to afford them the space to experiment and create something amazing and new, and take the pressure off of them," said Zeyl, who noted how Intiman has been assisting cabaret productions. "We did all the marketing and all the ticketing so they could just make the fucking art."

*For more information, visit <https://www.Intiman.org>.*



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# Bananamarts: Meet the Queer artists behind Seattle's newest maker mart

BY ARUL GNANASIVAM

PHOTO BY LIZZIE MACGOWAN

Deep in the heart of Capitol Hill, a new community is blossoming, one filled with grocery store art, 3D-printed traffic cones, recycled punk jewelry, and vibrator races. They're all tied together with one goal: the celebration of Queer joy and creativity. It's called Bananamarts, and it's just getting started.

Bananamarts, a Queer arts and crafts market that began in April of this year, is the brainchild of Seattle native Ali Weber. The market brings together local Queer artists and entrepreneurs to showcase their businesses and sell their products.

"In my own steps of coming out, a seed

was planted early on to say, "What if we did this and it was just Queer people?" Weber said. "What if we started something that you could come to, knowing it was a Queer market, Queer run, exclusively Queer vended, as Gay as you can get?"

The market takes place primarily at Stoup Brewing on Capitol Hill, although it's expanding slowly throughout Seattle. Featuring everything from clothes and crafts to sculptures and tattoos, the environment is as diverse and dynamic as the people who populate it. One unique trait is the sliding scale: most pricing is a "pay what you want" system within a range.

"A market is supposed to be, at its core, a community event where the little person wins," Weber said. "If your people can't thrive, who cares?"

nature, Atwood tailors his pieces such that anybody can wear them. "I'll try and make my stuff nongendered," he said. "Anyone can pick up any piece, and if it doesn't fit them, I'll make it fit them."

**Adam Atwood, Golden Age Accessories**  
<https://golden-age.studio/collections/all>  
<https://www.instagram.com/goldenage-accessories>



Adam Atwood is the creative behind Golden Age Accessories, which uses 3D printing and metal casting to create jewelry. All of Atwood's work comes from recycled materials, and features an industrial punk aesthetic. Atwood has been vending in Seattle on and off for around two years, and just got into the Bananamarts scene.

"I have been making my own clothes and accessories since I was a punk-rock teenager," he said. "I would find stuff in the free bin at college and tear it apart and sew it into new stuff. This is sort of a [line] from sewing and creating my own clothes to now designing accessories."

Atwood, who identifies as a transmasculine Queer person, has found a new confidence through creating. "It's really been a blessing and important to gain confidence through self-expression and to create things for myself," he said. Through Golden Age Accessories, he wants to share that feeling with others.

"What I'm doing is not just selling jewelry," Atwood said. "I'm selling self-esteem and building connections with people."

In line with Bananamarts' inclusive



Across the pond from the rugged metal design of Atwood's accessories is Key Lime Supply, a clothing and pottery brand focused on bringing the quirky coziness of grocery stores to fashion. Run by Emily Northrop and Bec Lyons, Key Lime started just four months ago, and joined Bananamarts after stumbling into one of the markets.

"We're so excited. I think both of us are extremely hit-the-ground-running kinds of personalities, so us together is quite a force," Northrop said.

Key Lime Supply sells tote bags and clothes featuring retro grocery store prints designed by Northrop and Lyons. The brand is also launching a new pottery line handmade by Lyons, and painted by her partner, Courtney LaPierre.

Northrop and Lyons, who both identify as Lesbian, used their connection with the Queer community as the foundation for



PHOTO BY ZOFIA ANCHONDO

their brand. "We're so entrenched in the Queer community," Lyons said. "What we're selling is really to target Queer folks."

Their work not only aligns with Bananamarts core tenant of Queer joy but also celebrates the two creatives.

"We want this to feel how our friendship feels," Northrop said. "Joyful, silly, and fun."

Bananamarts gave Northrop and Lyons the perfect starting point for their business, and has helped support them as they grow. Lyons noted how the barrier of entry is much lower, as opposed to other market spaces that can be more difficult to get into.

"The Queer community is a very unique community in that it's made up of people with different budgets and different accessibility needs," Lyons said. "It's [very inclusive], especially when you're trying to get a new brand out there."

Lyons and Northrop are both excited to launch new products and ideas as the brand continues to develop and grow.

"We've been thinking of doing things like matching outfits," Lyons said. "Like a cotton shorts and button-up duo," Northrop said. "We want to do a sticker sheet, or temporary tattoos, socks, hats."

**Emily Northrop and Bee Lyons, Key Lime Supply**

<https://www.keylimesupply.com/store>  
<https://www.instagram.com/keylimesupply>



Katie and Tiff Ta, a Seattle couple, have been creating together for almost the last 10 years. From a band called Suzy Jacuzzi to interviews with Seattle Queers about their favorite place to eat, hang out, etc., the couple has moved through a variety of zany and bold ideas. Their latest is a 3D-printing shop called Strange Magic.

The idea grew out of a passion for 3D printing, which Tiff started as a hobby around five years ago.

"We started designing stuff for our home, random things we wanted, cute things," Katie said. "That blossomed into wanting to share those designs with other people."

The designs span anything that pops into their head: olives, pasta, traffic cones, even giant paper clips. They're cute, colorful, and bold.

"There's a bit of an irreverent nature in what we create," Tiff said. "We identify as weirdos, and we want to make cute, silly, weird things that bring people joy," added Katie.

Sustainability also plays a big part in their designs. All the products are made with biodegradable plastic, which is derived from plants. The use of additive manufacturing also reduces the amount of waste created.

As Strange Magic is a newer brand, Katie and Tiff felt that Bananamarts provided a great way for them to find audiences and expand.

"It feels like a lot less pressure," Katie said, "knowing that we're going to go into a loving space and meet people who are doing a similar thing."

Katie and Tiff are eager to collaborate with more artists in the future. "I'm excited

about meeting new people who are doing similar things, who we can maybe collaborate with, or just even hang out with on a personal level," Katie said.

The community has already helped Katie and Tiff to expand Strange Magic, which is going to be wholesaling at Charlie's Queer Books, Seattle's home to Queer books and gifts.

**Katie Ta and Tiff Ta, Strange Magic**

<https://strangemagic.shop/>  
[https://www.instagram.com/strangemagic\\_shop](https://www.instagram.com/strangemagic_shop)

Meet these vendors and others at the next Bananamarts, September 14 at Caffè Via Seward Park. More info can be found at <https://www.bananamarts.com> and <https://www.instagram.com/bananamarts>.



PHOTO BY LIZZIE MACGOWAN

## Cutie Foundation carves out space for local young artists

BY HANNAH SAUNDERS  
 SGN STAFF WRITER

Since 2022, when Kaitlin Fritz discovered that art fairs and markets in Seattle are costly and inaccessible, the "Cutie Fest" she and a few others established has become a staple for local artists and vendors to sell their works, a place where they can come and go whenever they'd like, and set up their stations anywhere in Capitol Hill's Cal Anderson Park.

The spring and summer of 2022 saw three Cutie Fests, and the parent organization, the Cutie Foundation, claims each event more than doubled in size.

Cutie Fest has been hosting regular meetings since August of 2023. Attendees can assist with planning Cutie fests, tag along on visits to possible venue locations, help with fundraising to ensure the org has a future, and steer the TikTok page.

"Come to one meeting or come to multiple! No commitment. This is a drop-in thing so that more people can be involved and have a voice," states another Instagram post.

Cutie's website also highlights young artists where people can purchase products, like clothing and stickers, directly from sellers.

To bring local talent together, Cutie hosts other events, like an upcoming "Queers Night Out" at the Slip Gallery on First Avenue. The event will cater to aging Queers who prefer to be tucked into their beds by midnight. The theme and outfit inspiration recommended by Cutie is "ultra modern

brat girlie pop." September 7's Queers Night Out will feature flash tattoos, oracle readings, a photobooth, and a crafting station.

### Challenges

An August 8, 2024, Instagram post discusses current challenges with Cutie Fest, which relates to why the effort was launched in the first place.

"In order to get grant money, which would be major financial funding so I can hire employees and open a community center, Cutie needs to be registered as a 501(c)3 nonprofit," Fritz announced in the post.

A total of \$600 is needed to apply as an officially recognized nonprofit. Markets, on the other hand, generally charge \$70-200 to vend for one day, according to Cutie Fest. The organization said that beyond making enough to break even with these fees, artists have to make even more in order to turn a profit. If artists aren't reeling in the cash, it can be a time-consuming hobby. Cutie believes artists deserve to create for a living, and to be supported in their efforts.

Supporting young artists who are looking to start their own small businesses needs to be a community-wide focus. Cutie says it's the only way for artists to succeed.

Follow Cutie Fest on Instagram @CutieFoundation or visit <https://cutiefoundation.my.canva.site>.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CUTIE FOUNDATION





# Tragedy at the circus: Seattle Opera's gripping *Pagliacci*

BY SHARON CUMBERLAND

ALL PAGLIACCI PHOTOS COURTESY SEATTLE OPERA

**Seattle Opera**  
*Pagliacci*  
 McCaw Hall, Seattle Center  
 August 3, 2024

Opening night at the Seattle Opera is always exciting, but there was an extra thrill in the air at McCaw Hall when Ruggero Leoncavallo's popular *Pagliacci* opened for the first time since 2008. That production 16 years ago was a dreamy tribute to the traveling circuses of old, complete with acrobats, tightrope walkers, and jugglers. Fast-forward to August 3, 2024, and we have Stage Director Dan Wallace Miller's very different vision — just as musical but far more dangerous.

Miller has moved the story forward from the 1890s to 1947 in Calabria during the slow recovery from post-WWII poverty. The mountain village is just as picturesque as the original setting, but these folks are struggling with shortages and dreariness. When the circus comes to the town (which is still boarded up and plastered with political posters), we can appreciate why everyone gathers in front of the church to see something colorful and happy.

As the tragedy unfolds between Canio, the *pagliaccio* (circus clown) and Nedda, a young performer who may or may not be his wife, the dramatic irony intensifies between the excited townsfolk in front of

the makeshift curtain and the acrimony that looms behind it. The great pleasure of this opera for the audience is how cleverly we are made to identify with those sitting on the church steps while at the same time we watch the backstage conflict that burns like a slow fuse toward disaster.

Tenor Diego Torre sang Canio, the angry clown, with a distracted edge that seemed barely contained. His big aria, "Vesti la giubba," when he puts on his clown outfit, knowing that he will kill his lover, was sung with none of the pathos of a Pavarotti but with a ferociousness that made you understand the unhinged violence of murder. Monica Conesa's Nedda also departed from the traditional hard-hearted-lover theme to show us a woman, abused, desperate, and doomed. Both Diego and Conesa are debutants, and both were extremely moving. We hope to see them in Seattle again in the future.

The chorus has a large part in this opera, and everyone acted their part as though it were a real village with distinct individuals. The gang of rowdy children was especially pleasing, as was their piping accompaniment to the adult chorus.

The greatest element of opera is, of course, the music, and *Pagliacci* has some of the most dramatic and memorable in the repertoire. Conductor Carlo Montanaro led the orchestra through the wide range of

dangerous, charming, and dreamy pieces with the true hand of a conductor born in Italy.

In all, it was a fabulous evening of drama and music, and a real testament to the world-class opera we are privileged to have in Seattle.

This is also, sadly, the final season for the distinguished general manager, Christina Scheppelmann, who led Seattle Opera

through the pandemic with generosity and imagination and whose vision for the company has expanded the range of new works by new and previously neglected composers. We always knew she'd be with us for only five years — but what a great five years it has been! She has done a wonderful job, and we wish her well as she returns to Europe to direct the La Monnaie/De Munt in Brussels, Belgium.





# James Robinson takes the helm at Seattle Opera

BY ALICE BLOCH

PHOTO COURTESY SEATTLE OPERA

Five years ago, Christina Scheppelmann moved to Seattle with her wife to become the general director of Seattle Opera. Next month, James Robinson will move to Seattle with his husband to become the general and artistic director of the same company.

When Scheppelmann took the job in 2019, she made it clear that she planned to return to Europe after her five-year contract expired. Then she immediately had the unexpected and unenviable job of ensuring the survival of the company during the COVID pandemic. She has done that and more: the company is once again on solid financial ground, and audiences are nearly back to pre-pandemic levels. Scheppelmann will leave at the end of the year to become the general and artistic director of La Monnaie/De Munt in Brussels.

Robinson comes here from St. Louis Opera Theatre, where he served as artistic director for 16 years. While there, he produced 16 mainstage world premieres, including two operas composed by jazz musician Terence Blanchard — *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* and *Champion* — that have since had highly successful runs at the Metropolitan Opera. He also won a 2019 Grammy Award for directing a Met production of *Porgy and Bess*.

Seattle audience members might also recall Robinson's 2004 production of *Carmen*, which sold more tickets than any other opera in the company's history.

Robinson is highly respected as both arts administrator and stage director, and is

seen as a visionary with a practical bent. He believes in a community-based approach to programming. "I want to respond to the whole community," he said, "and tell *everybody's* story. Seattle has the fifth-largest LGBTQ+ population in the country, as well as a large Asian population. I want to see those communities represented onstage."

In St. Louis, Robinson produced four Gay-themed operas on the mainstage; he says all were received well by audiences.

The 2024-25 Seattle Opera season is, of course, already programmed, but Robinson is working with Scheppelmann to plan the 2025-26 season. He is now drafting a five-year plan of repertoire for the company. In the near future, he intends to mount a new opera by Huang Ruo, composer of the acclaimed work *An American Soldier*, which premiered at St. Louis Opera Theatre. He has also asked Blanchard to compose one for Seattle.

"Not to worry," Robinson said. "I don't intend to alienate the core audience, the lovers of traditional opera." In an interview published on the company's blog, he named a few of his favorite composers: Handel, Puccini, Mozart, Wagner. ("The first question I'm asked in Seattle," he says, "is 'How do you feel about Wagner?'" )

Robinson's husband, Jim Kroll, has taken early retirement from his career as a corporate consultant, and is excited about growing a garden in Seattle's favorable climate. "We've lived part-time in Palm Springs," Robinson said, "where every-

thing withers. You're lucky to get one tomato."

Although Seattle Opera is a nonprofit, not a business per se, Robinson expects to attend the Greater Seattle Business Association convention next month. "It's important for LGBTQ-owned businesses to recognize the contribution of an opera company to the community," he said.

## Seattle Opera's 2024-25 season

The first production of the current season, *Pagliacci*, has already completed its run, which garnered critical praise. (See Sharon Cumberland's review in this issue of *SGN*.) Up next is the world premiere of *Jubilee*, written and directed by Tazewell Thompson (already known in Seattle as librettist of the opera *Blue*, which was performed at McCaw Hall in 2022).

*Jubilee* tells the story of the 19th-century Fisk Jubilee Singers, who traveled the country and ventured as far as England to introduce audiences to African-American spirituals and raise funds for founding Fisk University. *Jubilee* will run October 12-25.

In January 2025 comes a concert version of Hector Berlioz's monumental work *Les Troyens*, followed by two of the most popular operas in the repertoire: Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Puccini's *Tosca*.

Smaller works will be interspersed between these offerings. In November, the chamber opera *Lucidity*, about the tragedy of dementia, will make its West Coast premiere at Tagney Jones Hall. It features a

score by Laura Kaminsky and libretto by David Ciole.

In December, Robert MacPherson, whose "drunken tenor" recitals have delighted audiences for several years, will return to the same hall in *A Very Drunken Christmas Carol*.

To round out the season, tenor Freddie Ballentine, a Seattle favorite, and pianist Kunal Lahiri perform a one-night concert at McCaw Hall on April 27.

For tickets and more information, visit <https://seattleopera.org>.



PHOTO COURTESY SEATTLE OPERA

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# Queerest show in the galaxy?: *The Acolyte* offers a half-hearted attempt at representation

BY AUDREY OSCARSON

IMAGE COURTESY STARWARS.COM

## *The Acolyte* Disney+

As a Queer person, I'm always keeping an eye out for Queer representation in new media, so when I heard rumors that the latest *Star Wars* series was "the Gayest ever," I knew I would have to watch it.

*The Acolyte*, which released its first episode on June 4, 2024, was directed by Leslye Headland (the first Queer person to direct part of the *Star Wars* franchise) and features actors that are gender diverse and identify as Queer. However, it's been a highly controversial show, both for its relationship to the *Star Wars* canon and in terms of Queer content.

Set a hundred years before *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, *The Acolyte* focuses on Force-sensitive twin girls separated at a young age. Now adults, Mae and Osha have grown in their abilities to use the Force through different means, while facing their past and dealing with a

rising threat.

Visually, I think this series is fantastic. The casting, costumes, sets, and visual effects make it beautiful to watch, and I appreciated the amount of thought that went into even the smallest details. Viewers are treated to epic light-saber duels and fight sequences.

We are also introduced to other interpretations of the Force, and a view of the Jedi as not the perfect order that we see in other productions. Instead, we see Jedi that are flawed and trying desperately to hide their mistakes, which I thought it was a refreshing take.

However, many fans have brought up issues with the continuity of the storyline. There are a few details that simply do not jibe with the already established canon, which has upset many fans. With the second season not yet confirmed, we don't know if these plot discrepancies will be remedied later on.

Even if they are, the writing left much

to be desired. I never felt like I could truly understand what a character's motives or desires were and ultimately found the character development lacking. Part of this could be due to the fact that so many new characters were introduced in just one season. Hopefully this will also be addressed if there is a second season, but throughout, I found myself questioning why a character would make a choice they did based on what we knew about them.

## Queer elements

One of the central plot points in the series is the all-female coven that the twins grew up in. The origins of Mae and Osha are not explicitly explained, but it is mentioned that they were created with the help of the Force and have two mothers, who many viewers have speculated are Lesbians. The vagueness does leave room for personal interpretation.

In episode four, we are introduced to a new character named Basil, which unfor-

tunately, in my opinion, leads to the worst way to be inclusive of gender-diverse people. Osha, upon meeting Basil, asks awkwardly, "Is he, or they, with us?" This whole encounter made me uncomfortable, because while yes, this is a milestone for *Star Wars*, it presented the issue of pronouns as something awkward that people would stumble over.

Furthermore, Basil is not human or even human adjacent — I would say he is similar to a walking rodent, and isn't even gender diverse. In a time when having your pronouns respected can be an uphill battle, I was hoping that, at least in *Star Wars*, it would be a universe where it could be a natural part of society.

I had very high hopes that Queer people would get actual representation in *The Acolyte*, yet what we got was awkward or never explicit. In such a vast galaxy, I had hoped that I could find people like myself, but they were sadly lacking.

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## Gillian Gaar on Springsteen: Why the Boss bussted the Big Man

BY ANDREW HAMLIN

SEATTLE-BASED AUTHOR AND VETERAN ROCK JOURNALIST GILLIAN GAAR HAS WRITTEN NUMEROUS BOOKS ON MUSIC GENRES AND ICONIC ARTISTS.

Music scribe, historian, and longtime Capitol Hill fixture Gillian G. Gaar is celebrating her 19th book release, *Bruce Springsteen at 75*, which came out in April. Although the iconic rocker, known for his blue-collar roots, poetic lyrics, and marathon sets, doesn't actually turn 75 until September, Gaar's book lays out his entire history, from his anonymous New Jersey beginnings to a transcendent and fecund rock and roll deliverance. She kindly took a few questions.

**Andrew Hamlin:** Asked to name his "desert-island discs," Bruce picked records by Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Van Morrison, Marvin Gaye, James Brown, Bob Dylan, and the Four Tops. What do these points on his musical map tell us about his overall sensibility?

**Gillian Gaar:** The average listener isn't going to know much about Bruce, so learning what songs are his favorites is a great introduction to his influences. Note that there are no post-'60s artists listed here. He's very much founded in classic rock and soul. Which I suppose is why he eventually did a soul covers album (*Only the Strong Survive*).

**AH:** I was shocked and amused to find a picture of Springsteen and saxophonist Clarence Clemons kissing — onstage during the "Born in the USA" tour! Did they do this often? Was it wild abandon, sticking it to the squares, and/or something else?

**GG:** The Boss and "the Big Man" had a very close relationship. They each said, when they really got to know each other, that they felt they had found a brother for life. And so it proved. Yes, their onstage interactions often did end in a big sloppy kiss. I was surprised there wasn't more reaction at the time, but maybe it was because it wasn't splashed all over the news. I would put it down to freewheeling high spirits, or "wild abandon" as you put it. Two guys comfortable in their own skins.

**AH:** Have you ever seen Springsteen play live? If so, where and when?

**GG:** I only saw him once, at Climate Pledge Arena in 2023. Interesting to see a large-scale show with no "effects," video graphics, etc. Just a bare stage and the musicians. Boy, the crowd was into it they were "Brooooo-cing" well before the lights went out! That was fun. Not having the all the extraneous stuff (video graphics) meant you could focus on the music, which made it more powerful.

**AH:** Bruce is known as a friend to the LGBT+ community. Did his Oscar-winning "Streets of Philadelphia" song mark him as a sympathetic straight, or was he known as such beforehand?

**GG:** He did a good interview with *The Advocate* at the time of the film's release, which may be online somewhere. He said he had a very "hetero" image, especially because of his pumped-up look during the "Born in the USA" tour, and so he felt that doing the "Streets of Philadelphia" song helped him reach out to the LGBT+ community in a way he'd never been able to do before. He said numerous people came up to him and thanked him for the song, which must've felt good.

**AH:** What, in your view, primed Springsteen's sympathy and empathy toward minority communities, and people in need?

**GG:** Probably [having grown] up impoverished himself. He really lived a hand-to-mouth existence until his career took off. Once it did, and he began playing large arenas, he always let local activist organizations set up tables at his shows and made donations to local organizations, like food banks.

It took him a while, but eventually he began speaking out on political issues that concerned him, starting with veterans' groups. If you look at online tour itineraries set up by fan websites, you see that he plays a lot of benefits, but most of them are small-scale local things, so they don't get a lot of coverage. He's said in interviews that since he's done so well financially, he feels he has a responsibility to give something back.

**AH:** The long-running and originally Seattle-based Springsteen maga-

zine *Backstreets* shut down, protesting Springsteen's seemingly callous reaction to ticket prices in the thousands of dollars. What's your take on that issue?

**GG:** It was a pretty tone-deaf response; in one instance, he said, "But if there's any complaints on the way out, you can have your money back." Yeah, venues don't offer refunds for that reason — or any other reason, really (unless you buy "ticket insurance," which I see is offered at some shows). No one's saying he should perform for free, but having "dynamic pricing" resulting in tickets going for \$5K each on the day of sale felt like price gouging. Which seemed to fly in the face of his "man of the people" image.

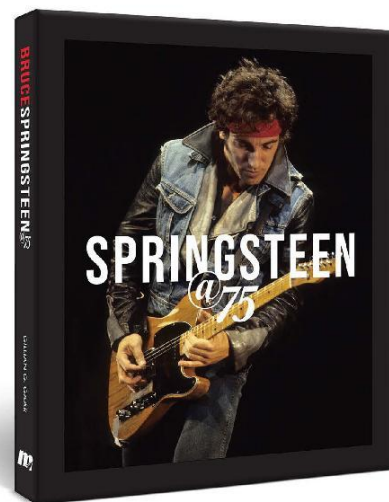
**AH:** Charley Cross, who died early in August, founded *Backstreets* and was one of the most intense fans of Springsteen, among music journalists at least. You knew him well and worked alongside him at *The Rocket*. What were his most important perspectives on Spring-

steen? Did he see your book, react to it at all?

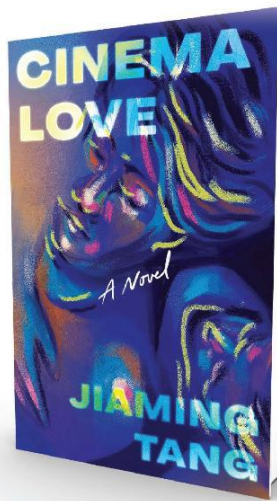
**GG:** The *Backstreets* offices were right next to the *Rocket* offices, but Charley kept them pretty separate; he never put the new Springsteen album on the *Rocket* office stereo, for example. So it wasn't pushed on us in any way.

I would flip through the magazines and subsequent book on occasion. But I didn't really read the book until I was working on my first Springsteen book (*Boss: Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, The Illustrated History*). The *Backstreets* book is a compilation of some of the articles in the magazines and also had a sessionography and tour guide — really great for Bruce fans, as there were no online resources to rely on. The articles were useful for a researcher, as the magazine spoke to many people who were in the inner circle. So it was a great resource.

Charley did know about my book, and I was planning on giving him a copy of it. Too bad that couldn't happen.



GAAR'S MOST RECENT BOOK ABOUT BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN REVEALS THIS ROCK ICON THROUGH HIS DECADES OF CAREER RELEASES, PERFORMANCES, AND ACCOLADES.



# Jiaming Tang's debut novel is all love

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON  
SGN STAFF WRITER

At its core, *Cinema Love* is, well, a love story. The debut novel from Jiaming Tang follows the experiences of Queer Chinese immigrants over 30 years, from secret loves, to cruising in movie theaters, to making a life in a strange and at times hostile new country. While the book centers on love — both romantic and platonic — a different kind of love initially led Tang to put pen to page.

"I was writing it during the pandemic while I was away from home, and it was, in the beginning, this love letter to New York City's Chinatown that I could not be a part of, because I was living in Alabama in graduate school," Tang said in an exclusive interview with SGN. "It was a love letter to the people in that community. It was very much something that was for myself."

Much of the story is rooted in New York's Chinatown, an homage to the people and places that raised Tang. "For me, all I want is for people to read the book and I just want them to feel that I love this place," he said.

A major location in the story, the East Broadway Mall in Chinatown, is a special spot he remembers visiting frequently with his family. "It was a space where all the immigrants of the Fujianese would go because it's a place where you could get work uniforms, you could get lunch, you could get phone cards so you could call home. It was this hub," he recalled. "Today, the mall is in decline, and Tang fears it won't make it to the end of the decade. The work he put into describing the mall's intimate details will hopefully go on to preserve its memory long after it's gone."

Much like the East Broadway Mall, other aspects of the book are rooted in a time and place inaccessible to readers. *Cinema Love* begins in rural Fuzhou. As a first-generation American, Tang was less familiar with Fuzhou and the immigration process, so he went to his parents for research. "There is a part of the book where the characters are immigrating to America and trying to find their footing as new migrants in New York City," Tang said. "A lot of that came from speaking to my mom and my dad and asking them what it was like."

Many pieces of the book were also inspired by Tang's observations on trips to China throughout his youth. As a teenager, he began to notice the ways Queerness was observed and treated in China. "I saw one of my mother's [male] friends touch another man's arm at a bus stop," Tang recalled. "The way he looked at the other man was so tender, there was so much desire in his eyes, but there was so much fear. It was the most ordinary thing in the world, trying to make contact with another human being, but because it was queer I think it became a

very frightening thing for him."

That moment stuck with Tang throughout his life. As an openly Gay Chinese-American man, he found himself interested in the experiences of older Queer immigrants. "That was the image that became the thing that I was obsessed with for a lot of my emotional life. I was not a writer when I was seventeen and I saw that, but the image of a person trying to make contact with another person and being scared of that, that became the major grounding point for the book," he said.

"The central question for me is, what does it mean and what does it feel like to be Gay in a place where homosexuality doesn't culturally or socially exist?" Tang continued. "The second part of that question for me is, what does it mean to be somebody who loves the place that they come from despite not being able to express who they are? I don't know how I became a writer, but somewhere along the line, those questions and my obsession with Chinatown in New York City combined into a project."

That small pandemic project has become a critically acclaimed success. American critics have praised *Cinema Love* for its depiction of Queerness, immigration, and the pursuit of the American dream. However, it's the story's emphasis on solidarity that has hit home with many readers.

During the writing process, *Cinema Love* evolved along with Tang's understanding of his social identities. "In the beginning, I thought it was going to be a book where the main focus of the book was these Gay men. I thought it was going to be about their relationships and the fact that they couldn't love each other in public," Tang said. "But what happened was the book ended up being about the women who were married to these men."

As Tang explored real stories of LGBTQ+ Chinese immigrants, he found a common throughline in the importance of community. "The emotional core in the book to me is this group of women who make Queerness possible," he said. "My perspectives on what it means to be a Gay person and what it means to belong to a Queer community evolved in those years as a part of the writing. I want to represent with dignity and sincerity, the women in my life who made it possible for me to be who I am, and I try to do that in the book. That's sort of the evolution there."

*Cinema Love* is a heartbreakingly resilient story, written by, for, and about love. The novel is a love letter to Tang's community, an embodiment of the allies who give him strength, and a testament to the bonds shared in public and in private by those who were told they didn't exist.



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**Garth Greenwell**  
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Thursday  
Sept. 19,  
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**Anna Zivarts**  
Steering away from car dependency



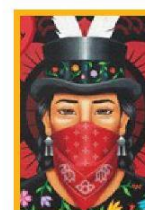
Friday  
Sept. 20,  
7 p.m.  
**Dr. Karen Tang**  
With TikTok's Jane Park



Sunday  
Sept. 22,  
1 p.m.  
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Oct. 9,  
7 p.m.  
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Saturday  
Oct. 19,  
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Wednesday  
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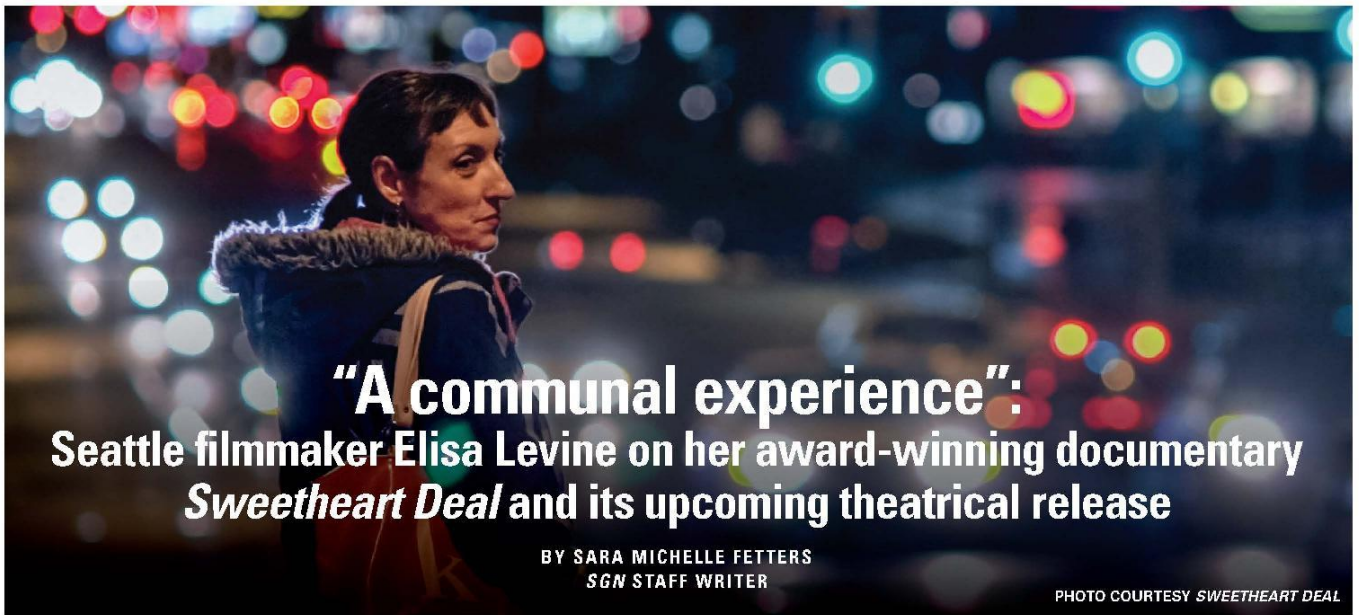


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## “A communal experience”: Seattle filmmaker Elisa Levine on her award-winning documentary *Sweetheart Deal* and its upcoming theatrical release

BY SARA MICHELLE FETTERS  
SGN STAFF WRITER

PHOTO COURTESY SWEETHEART DEAL

*Sweetheart Deal* was the best film I saw during the 2022 Seattle International Film Festival. It is the best Seattle-set documentary since 1984’s *Streetwise*. Heck, I’d go so far as to state it’s arguably one of the best documentaries I have ever seen.

Shot over the course of seven years, with most of the action transpiring on Seattle’s Aurora Avenue North, the documentary follows four young sex workers, Krista (nicknamed “Amy”), Kristine, Sara, and Tammy, all of whom are friends with — and even sometimes looked after by — the RV-dwelling Laughn, aka Elliott. Their stories are heartbreaking, harrowing, and bracingly intimate.

Directors Elisa Levine and Gabriel Miller showcase an empathetic gracefulness as they chart each woman’s journey. They capture a time and a place that is both uniquely Seattle yet also sadly universal, as it’s far too easy to imagine agonizingly similar stories playing out on busy (and not so busy) streets throughout the United States.

But Levine and Miller also find a glimmer of hope in the center of all the heartbreak, broken dreams, addiction, and missed opportunities. Moreover, they are also inadvertent witnesses to a scandalously monstrous crime, documenting a horrific betrayal that’s practically unimaginable in its excruciating magnitude.

Recently, and now that *Sweetheart Deal* is on the cusp of a theatrical release, I was also able to briefly get in touch with Levine to discuss how things have evolved in the time since her film’s festival debut.

“This journey has been incredibly difficult yet fulfilling on so many levels,” she said. “Sharing *Sweetheart Deal* with audiences at film festivals was one of the most rewarding parts of the process. There’s something magical about watching it in a theater, surrounded by people who are fully engaged with the story — it’s a communal experience that amplifies the emotional impact of the film in a way that’s hard to replicate elsewhere.

“Winning the Seattle Film Critics Award and various other accolades has been an unexpected but deeply gratifying acknowledgment of the hard work and dedication our entire team poured into this project. But what truly stands out for me are the conversations I’ve had with viewers after screenings — people who see their own humanity, their own struggles or triumphs reflected in the film. Hearing how *Sweetheart Deal* resonates with them, how it stirs emotions and sparks discussions, reminds me why we made this film in the first place. As we move into the next phase with the theatrical release, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude and anticipation. I can’t wait for even more people to experience the film.”

Co-director Gabriel Miller tragically passed in July of 2019, a little before *Sweetheart Deal* had been completed and well ahead of when it would begin to intimately connect with festival audiences. “I think Gabriel would be incredibly touched to see how much the film seems to mean to people,” reflected Levine. “Our ultimate goal was for audiences to see themselves in these women and to feel like they truly know them, just as we did.

“Gabriel’s work behind the camera was essential in achieving that connection. His cinematography style, along with his patience, was crucial in translating their stories and struggles into a visual experience that deeply resonates with viewers. His approach allows the audience to feel as though they are right there with [these] women, sharing in their experiences and emotions.”

As for the documentary hitting theaters now, right in the middle of an election year, when questions of a woman’s right to bodily autonomy, criminalizing sex work, homelessness, LGBTQ+ rights, and other important social issues are at the forefront of the political conversation? “We do feel that the timing of *Sweetheart Deal*’s theatrical release is particularly right,” stated the filmmaker emphatically.

“In an era when many issues are highly polarized, the film addresses topics like addiction, trauma, sexual abuse, women’s rights, and sex work in a way that cuts through partisan divides. Our hope is that it can ultimately unite people and spark conversations about these crucial issues, rather than deepen existing divisions.

“Much like how support groups for parents who have lost children to addiction focus on shared human experiences rather than politics, we hope that *Sweetheart Deal* will transcend political boundaries. By highlighting the resilience and struggles of the women in the film, we aim to bring people together to discuss solutions and understand what truly matters, beyond political affiliations. Ultimately, we believe the film speaks to everyone and offers a chance for collective reflection and dialogue.”

The following are the edited transcripts of my wide-ranging conversation with Levine when I had the pleasure to sit down with director back in April of 2022 (to discuss her film, the truth-is-stranger-than-fiction twist involving Elliott, and the rapturous reception the doc was receiving from festival audiences:

**Sara Michelle Fetters: I am so glad we’re getting the opportunity to talk, because your doc blew me away. I was literally rewatching a section of your film right before we sat down. There’s**

**so much here to think about and dissect. It’s extraordinary.**

Elisa Levine: Thank you. Thank you so much. I’m curious, which part were you rewatching?

**SMF: The part you would likely suspect. The third act. The point where everything...**

EL: Goes sideways.

**SMF. Exactly. I want to start closer to the beginning, the very beginning. When you and Gabriel started this project, what were your expectations? Did you have any preconceptions as to the type of stories you were going to be showcasing?**

EL: In the very early days, I had no idea that I was even going to meet Elliott, the self-proclaimed “mayor of Aurora,” because the project was called *Aurora Stories* at that point, and I was still looking around for those stories. It wasn’t until meeting him that I found the entry point into this world.

I think we had in mind that we wanted to shoot a cinema vérité film. We wanted to shoot observationally. We were very much influenced by *Streetwise*, and we were looking at that as a guideline in many ways. We knew we wanted to tell human stories, but yeah, we didn’t know at that time where it was going to go.

We were guests in that world of Aurora. We were gradually learning our way around and trying to understand what was going on. In the beginning, I was so naive. I didn’t even realize that most of the women, at least at the time, were out there because of addiction, primarily heroin. We always had it in mind that we wanted to...tell a human story, and humanize people, but we didn’t know where it was going to go. We didn’t know who was going to allow us to film their lives.

**SMF: Were you surprised that these women would let you so fully into their lives for such a long period of time?**

EL: I was very surprised. I remember showing an early work sample of this at a Seattle Documentary Association retreat many years ago. ...We had captured just a little bit of stuff at that time, and I remember standing up [in front of] everyone, and [saying], “Does anyone want to answer any questions about the processes of documentary filmmaking? How do you get vérité? How do you get it? I don’t know how to do it.”

It ended up being that you just do it. You tell people that you’re there and you establish

relationships, but you then tell people that “we’re invisible.” But a lot of it is relationship building, though, prior to that. If you’re successful, then people eventually will get into the mode of ignoring the camera.

Don’t misunderstand. They’re always aware the camera’s present. But they will get into the mode of doing what — at least it’s what I felt like while shooting — they normally would be doing if you were not there.

You never know, of course. You never know how much the camera is influencing. But we were hoping that things were not going to be performative. It was these four women who really embraced us and wanted their stories told. We ended up focusing on them and built strong relationships, really close relationships.

**SMF: When you build those relationships, and because this is such, as you say, a vérité style of filmmaking, how emotionally difficult was it for you as filmmakers to observe everything that was happening, ask these difficult and tough questions, and not want to become involved yourselves?**

EL: Can you be more specific?

**SMF: Like with Sara or with Krista. When you witness the decisions they are making. When you see what is happening to them. You’ve spent so much time forging these relationships, so it had to be difficult sitting there, watching events transpire as they do.**

EL: When you’re working with people this closely, you do become friends. It just happens, and our relationships were really close. There were many hours that we spent with the camera off. There were many hours that we just spent with the women when they needed us: a ride to the methadone clinic, sitting next to Sara in the emergency room, stuff like that. We were just spending time with them because we cared about them as people.

If anyone ever asked us for anything, except for money, we tried to help. If anyone was ever like, “I need a referral to a needle exchange” or something like that, we tried to help. We wanted them to get out of that life. We wanted that for them. But we were also very aware that they didn’t want us to fix everything for them. They didn’t need a savior.

And we were in no position to save them! We were in no position to tell somebody that they needed to go into treatment. Heck, they’d already been through treatment a dozen times, and they didn’t want somebody coming in and telling them, “This

is what you need to do." They would've stopped talking to us day one.

But we really wanted to honor where they were at, what their struggles were, and what the story that they wanted to tell. But, yeah, that's a tough and interesting question.

**SMF:** And then there is Elliott...

**EL:** Yes, Elliott. There's lots to unpack there.

**SMF:** When did you all connect? At what point did he become so comfortable letting you all in to his world and his relationship with the women of Aurora Avenue North?

**EL:** I initially came across Elliott in 2009. I was looking around for stories on Aurora, and he was outside working on the generator of his RV, up by the St. Vincent's around 135th. I had been talking to several people, but a lot of them were not ready to talk — people who were living in RVs and the like. There wasn't that much of that in Seattle at that time, and there were even fewer who were brazen enough to park right on Aurora.

Elliott didn't showcase any reticence to our presence. He didn't have that. If anything, he was like, "Well, where have you been?" It was like we were old friends. When I came across him, he seemed to want his story documented. He seemed to jump in front of the camera.

I think I initially did the pre-interviewing with him, stuff like that, and eventually he let us start filming inside the RV. Elliott told me his whole spiel: I'm the mayor of Aurora. I'm the guy to know. Everybody

knows me. He was portraying himself as really creating a community atmosphere. He was profiled in *Real Change*, and he was putting forth the image that he wanted to portray about himself.

**SMF:** With what we end up learning about him, things Seattleites will likely be familiar with, what with all the local news coverage at the time, did you or anyone else in your team have any misgivings about Elliott? What were your feelings when you started to get to know him?

**EL:** I definitely did not. Initially, he was like a grandfatherly figure, which is funny now. But no, I didn't have that, but I was gradually learning what exactly was going on, and then it was becoming apparent as things went on that he was portraying what he wanted everyone to see: that he wanted everyone to kick their habit, that he was there to protect them.

Well, maybe not everyone. But almost everyone. His RV, it was like a rest place to stop and get cared for. And not just for women but also for men too.

**SMF:** When did it become apparent things were more off with him than you suspected? Was it when the police arrested him? Before that?

**EL:** It took a little time to put together and realize that there [were] any relationships or whatever going on between him and the women. We filmed something like 350 to 400 hours of footage. As things went on, there were definitely moments where we're just like, "Is this guy as great a deal?"

There were definitely moments of doubt.

One day, people going in and out of his RV would be like, "I'm so mad at him!" But then the next day they'd be proclaiming, "I love him so much" or "He's such a good friend." You couldn't keep up, and it was different for each person. But, yeah, I think this was the point where we were picking up that Elliott was not a saint. But was he also the best option out here for these women? No one else seemed like they were stepping up to help. It was confusing.

But as far as the stuff with the allegations and what he ended up being arrested for and everything? And then sentenced for? We did not have any clue that he was doing unconscious sexual assault... Gabriel couldn't believe it at first. That was really freaking disturbing to find that out. Reading the police report and stuff like that, that was what made me really feel sick. I threw up when I read it.

After that and then looking back at the footage, going through it all again, in retrospect, there were little things that you pick up on after finding all of this stuff out. It brings a whole new light to what we had been doing. There were so many pieces of footage where I was just like, "How did we not put all of that together?" It stings.

**SMF:** Ultimately, what do you hope audiences take away from the film?

**EL:** I think the most important thing is being able to connect with these people, with the women in the film, on a human level. I think that if you're able to see yourself, or see someone you know in them, in those women, then something's working. It's the beginning to bringing a deeper

understanding of why people might get into addiction and how difficult it is to get out, even when these individuals are trying so hard to do so... and often ending up back right where they started... If we can understand, maybe we can be in a better position to help. Wouldn't that be great?

*Sweetheart Deal returns to Seattle theaters for a limited engagement at the SIFF Film Center September 27 thru October 3. Director Elisa Levine, editor Brittney Kaplan, and producer Peggy Case will be on hand for post-screening Q&As on Sept. 27 and 28. For advance tickets, please go to <https://www.siff.net/programs-and-events/filmmaker-qanda-sweetheart-deal>.*



**TRUST IN LOVE**  
Theaters | VOD

Can a single element save a film from disaster? That's certainly the case with the plucky indie drama *Trust in Love*. Writer and lead actor Jimi Petulla and director Mick Davis have crafted a rudimentary soap opera of familial dysfunction overflowing in one clichéd moment after another. However, the core elements are based on truth. Better yet, they break through all of the melodramatic sludge with surprising effectiveness. As many times as I rolled my eyes, there were countless more when my heartstrings were effectively tugged, my funny bone whimsically tickled. Most importantly, my affections were tenderly won over.

But the best part? That one element that kept everything from surfing a bad wave and wiping out: a sensational father-son saga of acceptance, togetherness, and love that overflows in surprisingly intimate universal truths. No matter how absurd events may become or how one subplot impolitely crashes into another, the emotional foundation remains cathartically strong. This allows this project to resonate on a deeply personal level. It is also what makes watching it worthwhile.

Legendary Malibu music producer Mickey Ferrera (Petulla) feels like his life has smashed into a tidal wave. After 18 years of marriage, his much younger wife

Sofia (Natasha Wilson) has asked for a divorce. That would be bad enough, but his eldest daughter, Jennifer (Sydney Bullock), is also dealing with teenage peer pressure while also concealing a not-so-secret crush on her equestrian coach Brian (Jeremiah Blake). Then there's Mickey's son Cody (Logan Arditty). A budding artist, he's developed a romantic interest in one of his (male) classmates, and a pair of his school's most noxious bullies have uncovered his secret.

Topping it all off? The record Mickey is producing for a once proud rock band is going nowhere, and it's frustratingly dawning on all those in the recording studio that the quartet's best days are slowly vanishing on the horizon like a California sunset.

One of the best ideas Davis and Petulla had was to cast their picture with a bevy of amateur actors, talented newcomers, and veteran musicians (who are either playing themselves or purposeful variations on their public personas). They've also allowed a laid-back, laissez-faire California attitude to permeate the production. Think of *The Dude* (*The Big Lebowski*) or *Jell Spicoli* (*Past Times at Ridgemont High*) and you'll get what I mean. There's something refreshingly distinctive about this that's happily disarming.

And don't get me started on the cinematography. Viorel Sergovici's camerawork is nothing short of outstanding.

A handful of the story elements are

noticeably rough. Almost everything concerning Mickey and Sofia's divorce falls flat. As events are seen almost entirely from his perspective, some of what transpires between the duo can come across as decidedly one-sided. This has the unintentional side effect of sugarcoating much of the naturally unpleasant complications that arise when two people try to deal amicably with a situation such as this, only to have animosity and distrust worm their way into the proceedings. Sofia's journey feels entirely in service of Mickey's, and this keeps her from manufacturing an interior life of her own outside of his long shadow.

It's how the narrative deals with the pair's children where everything comfortably hangs ten. Bullock is quite good as Jennifer. While her character's subplots don't have tons of emotive staying power or dramatic zest, the young actress still makes a strong impression. A scene at the equestrian stable in which she inadvertently learns a demoralizing truth about Brian is unexpectedly heart-stopping, while playfully quiet moments with Petulla or Wilson showcase spunky charm.

But it is events involving Cody's heartbreakingly befuddled coming out where Petulla's screenwriting soars and Davis's confident direction perfectly augments what's happening to the teenager. It's often hard to watch, and those easily triggered by hate speech and homophobic violence (both physical and psychological) will

undoubtedly want to look away. Nonetheless, the effortless, cathartic beauty of how Cody and Mickey communicate caught me by surprise.

There's this terrific scene, not too long after the son sits down and timorously reveals what he's been dealing with to a father finally ready to put all distractions aside and listen, where any indifference or vitriol I may have felt disappeared. Mickey takes Cody to chat with one of his friends, drag performer Lucy the Magi (Alberto Davila Jr.), and a brief moment that could have become a stereotypical, clichéd disaster ends up anything but. The whole sequence, no more than maybe five minutes, overflows in authenticity, and all three actors achieve a level of relaxed intimacy that speaks volumes.

This drama does have its issues. It does not help that the climax is like something out of a 1970s television movie of the week, goofily mawkish and dripping in sentimentality. I also wasn't a fan of how Mickey and Sofia's divorce resolved itself, its tidiness coming perilously close to being insulting.

No matter. Where it counts most, the film gets almost everything right: the interactions between devoted parents and their hurting children, who try to act as if they stoically understand what is happening but on the inside are crumbling to pieces. For that reason — and in some respects, that reason alone — *Trust in Love* won me over. I say give it a look.

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