

The Show Queen Must Go On

(Review of *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater & Gay Culture* by John M. Clum)

Review written by Alan Ilagan



Every good gay boy should know his musical theater history, or at the very least be able to hum a few bars from a classic musical (that is, something prior to the invasion of *Cats*, *Phantom*, and *Les Miserables*.) John M. Clum's latest book, *Something for the Boys*, is a fascinating study on Musical theater and Gay Culture, and how the two have had such a strong connection. In a ferociously fast-paced world where disco beats, drugs, MTV, AOL, video games and the like threaten to turn theater into an ancient and obscure exercise in futility, we are reminded of the importance which the musical theater once held for gay men, and the new hopes and possibilities it represents for the current generation. Clum's book does not read like some dull, dry piece of academia; rather, he brings to light the time-honored tradition of gay men and their love of musicals. The most interesting aspect of the theories and explanations proffered as to why we love musicals is Clum's vision of the musical theater as a bonding experience for gay men. In the not-so-distant past, the theater was one of the only places where being gay was a non-issue ~ even more than that, it was often expected and celebrated. To this day, many of us have found that our first moment of "finding ourselves" takes place in our high school drama club. There we find a place

where “acting” is the norm ~ and how many of us have spent our youth doing just that ~ acting straight, acting butch, acting like we don’t care that the love of our lives has just broken our hearts?

It is not only this affinity with acting that many gay men experience which binds us to the musical theater ~ it is the actual attendance at a performance that brings us together as a community, a ritual as old as theater itself. For Clum, his sojourns to witness various musical productions in locations from New York City to London to New Jersey (for a Papermill Playhouse staging of *Gypsy* with Betty Buckley) turn into chances to visit and reconnect with gay friends of the past. This is a powerful acknowledgment: musical theater as a bonding experience for gay men, akin to watching football or other such nonsensical sports for straight men. In the dark of the theater, everyone in the audience is the same. There is comfort and safety when the lights go down, and for that one shared moment everything of the real world is locked outside and we are the majority.

One of the most entertaining sections of the book pertains to musical theater divas ~ a must-read for any blossoming gay boy. Clum masterfully identifies our relation to the diva ~ the recognizance of a strength and determination, coupled with a gritty sense of survival, and topped off with a fabulous, undying sense of style that remains intact at all costs. The two trump cards that any decent diva holds ~ survival and style ~ are also the double-duty of many a gay man.

Best of all, Clum connects the past and present of musical theater (by relating his conversations with his younger students) and finds praise and hope in such current-day theatrical productions like *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, where the protagonist is a rock&-roll diva. By crediting his students with a knowledge of the musical theater on a par with his own, Clum gives our younger generation props ~ we’re not all Xpopping, disco-bopping, muscle-maniacs ~ some of

us carry on the grand tradition of the show queen and, to paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, “We’re still here.”