



Mouth to mouth to mouth to mouth (from left): Winnie (Irvin Keller), Rachel (Ben Schatz), Trampolina (Chris Dilley), and Trixie (Maurice Kelly)

performance

# Sweet smell of Sicks-cess

With tight harmonies, tough politics, and a new show at New York's Studio 54, the Kinsey Sicks have arrived **By Mubarak Dahir**

**G**ive a former presidential adviser a big wig, smear on gobs of makeup, put him in a garish gown that rivals the infamous flip-flop dress from *Priscilla*, and what do you get?

Headlines.

CLINTON AIDE TURNS DRAG QUEEN! screamed a banner in the September 18 *National Examiner* tabloid.

"Oh, my God, you do know what it means to be trashed in the tabloids?" hisses Ben Schatz with delight. "It means we've really made it!"

No longer counseling Bill Clinton on AIDS policy and gay rights, Schatz is now better known by his biting drag per-

sona, Rachel. But behind the mascara is a Harvard-educated lawyer, the former executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, and an AIDS insurance expert who was once a regular talking head on the TV talk show circuit, including *Nightline*.

Her coat-and-tie days behind her, Rachel is one of four sassy, singing drag queens who call themselves the Kinsey Sicks—a moniker meant to indicate their high homosexual score on the acclaimed Kinsey scale as well as their bent sense of merriment. The quartet is completed by the outlandishly bespectacled Winnie ("Think prim den mother," quips alter ego Irvin Keller), the plat-

inum-blond Trixie ("a gold-digging vamp," explains Maurice Kelly), and the slinky Trampolina ("wide-eyed, innocent, blundering," says Chris Dilley).

The Sicks will make their off-Broadway debut October 24 at New York's famed Studio 54, where they are scheduled to appear at least through March.

The group was spawned eight years ago when a bunch of friends—mostly lawyers and corporate types by day—got dolled up for a Bette Midler concert, discovering not only a mutually fabulous taste in drag but also a set of harmoniously blended vocal cords. They launched their career by giving free "concerts" at Harvey Milk Plaza on

the corner of Market and Castro streets in San Francisco, where their first performance earned them \$37 in singles and loose change.

The Sicks have spent the past seven years nurturing a grassroots fan club by appearing at gay bars, cabarets, and community events such as leather contests and bear runs. "We have a huge bear following," deadpans Schatz. They've even put out two CDs.

An equal blend of theater, music, and politics (they point to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as a major inspiration), the group's brand of gut-wrenchingly funny showmanship with a message is finally winning them national acclaim. They've been the subjects of an expansive feature in *The New York Times* and segments on ABC's *20/20 Downtown* and CBS's *The Early Show*. To capitalize on the off-Broadway showcase, the foursome have all quit their cushy day jobs and officially swapped their briefcases for Prada bags.

Though their act is chock-full of comedic shtick and vulgar puns—drag requisites—the Kinsey Sicks eschew diva lip-synching. Instead, their pitch-perfect a cappella harmonies are of original lyrics sung to the melodies of popular tunes. From their lips, "I Will Follow Him" comes out as the safer-sex anthem "I Will Swallow Him," the Jackson 5's "ABC" morphs into "AZT," and Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" is twisted into a Jewish mother's neurotic admonition: "Don't Be Happy...Worry" ("Oy, oy, oy, something always could go wrong/That's the moral of this song").

But the Kinsey Sicks also have a somber side. Their show includes a moving tribute to one of the group's original members, now deceased—a song that Keller says has taken on a deeper meaning since September 11. "It's a song about loss and grief and learning to celebrate life—both the life of the lost person and your own, living life," says Winnie's alter ego, who is, like Schatz, a lawyer and the former executive director of an AIDS agency.

The entire show, Keller says, though draped in humor, "will provide the audience with a lot of release. Contrary to simply being an escape, laughter is a way of processing a lot of emotions." ■

Dahir also writes for *Self*, *Business Traveler*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

performance review

# Funny that way

Comic Jason Stuart wears the pants on his hilarious new CD—and proves that gay guys can get laughs from all kinds of audiences without doing drag

By Steve Gdula



## Gay Comedy Without a Dress

■ Jason Stuart ■ Self-distributed ■ \$15

As the title of his CD, *Gay Comedy Without a Dress*, suggests, stand-up comic Jason Stuart knows the difference between being laughed with and laughed at. Culled from appearances at the Acme Comedy Co. in Minneapolis, Stuart's CD shows just how far that out gays and lesbians have come in the field of entertainment. They no longer need to don the proverbial dress and camp it up to get the laughs. In mining his own experiences for material, Stuart—an openly gay actor who has appeared on *The Drew Carey Show* and *Will & Grace*—manages to find his audience's common denominators. While the key to Jason Stuart's appeal is his ability to cross over to a wider audience without alienating anyone, gay or straight, in the process, it also doesn't hurt that he's funny as hell.

Stuart wastes no time digging into his routine, going from zero to frantic in six seconds flat. Over the course of an hour Stuart barely allows the audience time to catch its

breath. Some of his material is universal—his trials with his family or his religion—while other aspects of his show rely on an exclusively gay spin. When relating how his brother asked him "what role he plays" in his same-sex relationships, Stuart quips, "I'm Patty Duke in *The Miracle Worker*."

At a few points during his act Stuart name-checks the gay canon—for instance, clicking his heels and blurt-ing "There's no place like home, there's no place like home" when he feigns exasperation with the crowd. The comic is at his sharpest when he goes off the script and interacts with the crowd. His remarks about others are stinging without being mean-spirited, and his jabs at himself are self-deprecating without sounding bitter.

Unfortunately, when compared to the fresh angle with which he approaches the rest of his material, the nods to *The Wizard of Oz* and Judy Garland seem perfunctory and listless. Stuart is funny enough without having to rely on such clichés. ■

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