

Paul J. Williams' Luby's-based Comedy Tops Uptown Players' Gay Pride Arts Fest

By ELAINE LINER

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Christopher Neumann



Paul J. Williams' solo comedy *Dishing It Out* serves laughs on a Luann platter at Uptown Players.

Details:

Uptown Players' Pride Performing Arts Festival

Continues through September 14 at Kalita Humphreys Theater, 3636 Turtle Creek Blvd. Call 214-219-2718.

Subject(s):
[Uptown Players](#)

"Welcome to Luby's. Salad fer you?" drawls actor Paul J. Williams, playing one of a cafeteria full of characters in his gently tossed solo comedy *Dishing It Out*. Williams' show is at the top of the menu for **Uptown Players'** annual smorgasbord of short plays for the two-weekend Pride Performing Arts Festival at Kalita Humphreys Theater.

Working on a bare stage in the upstairs Frank's Place space, Williams' one-act serves up a slice of life (and imaginary icebox pie) in a Luby's somewhere in East Texas. Playing all the employees and some customers who've tumbled off a tour bus after a morning looking at blooming dogwoods, Williams performs a different voice and specific gestures — a pat on the hair net of the salad lady, a pursing of lips for the righteous Bible study leader — for each persona.

He's brilliant at this, like a one-man *Greater Tuna*, skillfully slipping in and out of characters, accents and attitudes familiar to Texans. His little comic tuna casserole comes with a side of cultural commentary, too. As "Sister Helen Holy," the deep-fried and sanctified "Bab-a-tist" lady holding her prayer meeting in Luby's back room, Williams brings some of that old-time religion directly to the audience, but just for grits

and giggles.

"What's your church background?" Williams-as-Helen asked a female couple during the opening matinee performance. "We used to be Catholic," said one. Quipped Williams, "And now you're lesbaterian?"

A veteran of cruise ship entertainment, Williams works a crowd like a master, or mistress when he's in the guise of the prissy Helen Holy. "Jesus wore sandals," Helen snapped to one young bohemian on the front row. "You need to dress up."

As "Quintessa," observer of human behavior and server of meats, Williams sums up the cafeteria experience succinctly: "Don't be comin' to Luby's if you ain't prepared to make some decisions." Amen, sister, and push that tray along. (*Dishing It Out* is performed again at 8 p.m. on September 11 and 2 p.m. Saturday.)

Made in Heaven, also part of the Uptown Pride Fest, is a silly-trashy three-legged farce about conjoined twins who share six major organs, including a giant penis. It's a disjointed 65-

minute playlet, more of a comedy sketch really, written by Jay Bernzweig, directed by Kevin Moore.

The pleasant surprise is how well the performances by Uptown Players' cast improve on the one-joke premise. The four actors provide lots of hearty har-hars, beginning with the sight gag of lookalike actors (Michael Moore and Philip Andrew) clomping around in one enormous pair of dungarees.

Brother Max (Andrew) has decided to propose to the girl of his dreams, Jessica (cute-as-a-shiny-little-button Arianna Movassagh). Not so fast, says brother Benjie (Moore). Benjie's gay and his idea of honeymoon bliss is bedding Ryan Gosling, or perhaps a rent boy named Gilbert (Sergio Antonio Garcia, wearing jeans so tight you can tell his religion).

Long set-up short, Gilbert turns up at the guys' apartment and turns out to be Jack, Jessica's first husband. He's sexually ambiguous, going gay-for-pay but still carrying a torch for his ex-wife. He moves in with the brothers and Jessica, blurring lines of gender identity in every direction.

Best bits come from the quick timing in arguments between the twins (Moore's better at this, with Andrew dodgy on lines on opening night). "I was afraid," Benjie says to Max about coming out as gay. "Of what?" says Max. "That I'd move out?"

Frustrated Jessica attempts suicide by brownies and by the end the brothers decide that sharing a wife and a lover is no way to share a penis. As a lightweight allegory about elastic sexuality, *Made in Heaven* stretches its point. As a piece of legit theater, however, it barely has a leg to stand on. (They do this one again at 6:45 p.m. Saturday.)

Uptown's audience loves a hammy act like Amy Armstrong and Freddy Allen, the semi-raunchy comedy-cabaret duo who opened this year's Pride Arts Festival with a one-night-only performance September 5 on the big stage at Kalita Humphreys Theater. He plays keyboard. She sings showtunes and pop standards, and carries on extended banter with the crowd — and at Uptown that means 200 middle-aged gay men, a handful of lesbians and one straight critic.

When Armstrong sings, she's Adele with some years on her, doing husky versions of "Everybody's Girl" from the musical *Steel Pier* and "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," the old Belinda Carlisle pop tune reworked as a soulful ballad. When Armstrong talks, she comes off as a young Sophie Tucker, jesting about her weight and her lousy sex life. "What's my favorite sexual position? Comfortable."

At the Uptown show, Armstrong talked more than she sang in the 90-minute set and she got giddily blitzed on cosmos carried onstage as a running joke by the lobby bartender. Those must have been strong cocktails. She forgot the lyrics to her closing number and had to be prompted by the ever-patient Freddy.

Like Williams, this pair performs regularly on gay cruises. Onboard a ship, you'd have barely noticed how much Armstrong, laden with pink drinkies, was listing to the port side.

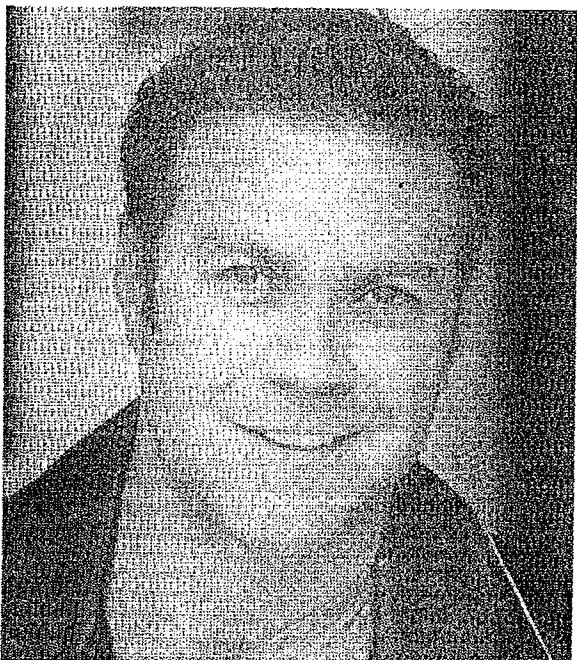
Other shows at the Uptown Pride Fest: Robert Aguirre-Sacasa's *Good Boys and True*, one-act set in a prep school for boys (7:45 p.m. Thursday and 4 p.m. Saturday); *Five Lesbians Eating a Quiche*, five-woman comedy set in the 1950s by Evan Linder and Andrew Hopgood, starring

Andi Allen and Marisa Diotalevi (8:30 p.m. Saturday); and *The Timekeepers*, drama by Jay Bernzweig about a gay man and an elderly one imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp (8 p.m. Friday).

Web Head: Paul J. Williams' Luby's-based Comedy Tops Uptown Players' Gay Pride Arts Fest

Gay Up Stand Up comedy tour comes to Wichita

By Matt Hanne



WICHITA - For comedian Jason Dudey, setting Wichita as the first stop on his new comedy tour was a bit of a no-brainer. "I was in Wichita until I was three," he recalls, "My dad went to North and my mom went to East. Every summer we'd go back to spend a few weeks at Grandma Dudey's house."

The "Gay Up Stand Up" Tour will bring four comics on a three-stop tour through the Midwest, starting with Wichita on Friday, Sept. 5. The other stops are Tulsa and Dallas. "It's time for a fun, gay show," Dudey said. "On this tour

two of us are gay men, one is a lesbian, and then Shawn Pelofsky is our gay royalty - the queens love her."

Dudey was featured on last year's *Last Comic Standing*, although he'll be the first to tell you that he was cut out of quite a bit of it. He also has two comedy specials on LOGO entitled *One Night Stand Up* that will air sometime in late fall or early winter. The other is his very own comedy DVD coming out in August, called *Doody, Duty, Dudey*.

Erin Foley is the lesbian comedian on the tour. She has also been seen on NBC's *Last Comic Standing*, however she is probably most recognized for her work on Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* - she is Allison the fact-checker. She, too, will be filming her own half-hour special in August.

With a charming southern drawl,

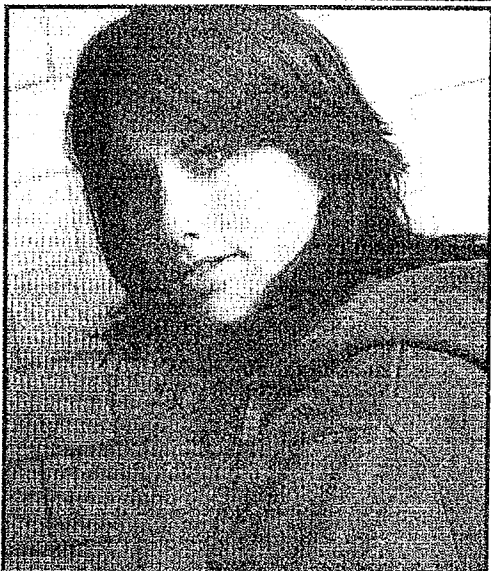
Paul J. Williams is hardly able to contain his excitement about the tour: "I just think it's gonna be a blast - especially because we are doing stuff for the Midwest. I mean, the coasts get all of the attention."

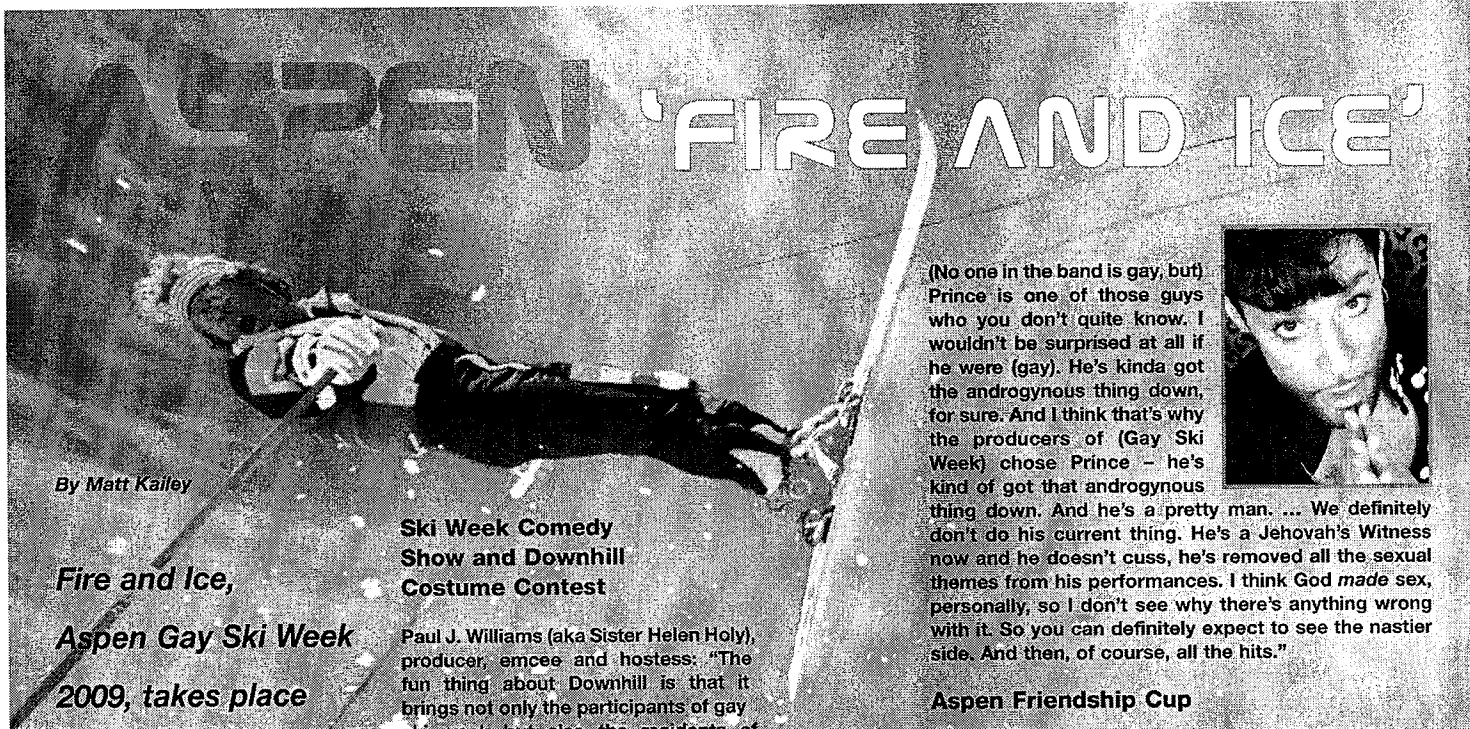
This is not Williams' first trip to Wichita - he remembered doing a show and eating at Spaghetti Warehouse in Wichita for Pride 1997. Aside from that he works for RSVP Cruise lines and finds himself performing onboard much of the time. He also originated a one-man comedy show called "Dishing It Out," featuring characters who inhabit a southern cafeteria. "There's Helen Holy, the Southern Baptist version of Dana Carvey's Church Lady," Williams explained. "I also have the white-trash, chain-smoking, beehived real estate agent, Melba Pickens."

"It's an easy joke here," Williams commented, "but when we first started putting [the tour] together, I told Jason, 'We're playing Wichita, Tulsa and Dallas? What is this, the Tornado Tour? The Funnel Clouds of Funny? The Comedy Twisters?'"

"The only thing that would make this show better is if Fred Phelps shows up to picket it. My career would be so peaked, because I grew up Southern Baptist and I can go head-to-head with him on scripture."

The final comic on the tour is the Streisand-esque Shawn Pelofsky. "I'm your token straight Diva," Pelofsky quipped. "And I'm really excited to be a part of this tour because all of the comics are fabulous. I really pride myself on being a comedian to the gay community. If you're a gay man then I'll find you - and if you're a gay woman then you'll probably find me."





'FIRE AND ICE'

By Matt Kailey

**Fire and Ice,
Aspen Gay Ski Week
2009, takes place
from January 11-18,
with parties,
entertainment,
hot guys and gals
and the most
fun you'll ever
have in the cold,
cold snow – oh,
and there's skiing,
too! Check out some
of the highlights
below and find
the complete
schedule and more
information at
www.gayskiweek.com.**

Ski Week Comedy Show and Downhill Costume Contest

Paul J. Williams (aka Sister Helen Holy), producer, emcee and hostess: "The fun thing about Downhill is that it brings not only the participants of gay ski week but also the residents of Aspen out to see it. That's a great way for the two crowds to mix, and everybody has such a great



time. And I try to do everything I can do to make it fun for everybody included. ... You never know what the participants are going to come down in, but it's always a lot of fun and one of the highlights of Ski Week. You can count on the Downhill Costume Contest being well attended and over the top. This will be my eighth year producing the comedy show, and I've

devised a formula where I bring in a gay male comic, a lesbian comic and a drag performer, and the show is affectionately known as A Fag, A Drag and a Dyke. And we're sticking to that again this year, and bringing back one of our drag acts that's done really well in the past, a guy by the name of Mark Alan Smith, who's a phenomenal vocal impressionist, and he just brought the house down when he was there a few years ago. My gay male comic is Scott Kennedy, who's been all over Comedy Central and is a really big old bubba. Most people would never know he's gay because he's kind of a redneck. And Erin Foley is my lesbian, who's really new to the scene and hip and fun."

Purple Reign, Prince Tribute Band

Jason Tenner, Prince: "This is my 12th year. I started doing Prince in the summer of 1997. ... I went out and dressed up as Prince for a Halloween party ... and I was already doing music and had a band, so I decided we should start putting Prince stuff in the show and that was the most popular stuff we were doing, so we're like, 'Hey, this is the town for it – Vegas, impersonators.' ... We script it very loosely. My guys don't have to take acting classes or anything. It's all about the music.

(No one in the band is gay, but Prince is one of those guys who you don't quite know. I wouldn't be surprised at all if he were (gay). He's kinda got the androgynous thing down, for sure. And I think that's why the producers of (Gay Ski Week) chose Prince – he's kind of got that androgynous thing down. And he's a pretty man. ... We definitely don't do his current thing. He's a Jehovah's Witness now and he doesn't cuss, he's removed all the sexual themes from his performances. I think God *made* sex, personally, so I don't see why there's anything wrong with it. So you can definitely expect to see the nastier side. And then, of course, all the hits."



Aspen Friendship Cup

Glenn Witman, captain of GForce gay hockey team: "Our team is a collection of the best gay ice hockey players in North America. We are on a mission to break down the negative stereotypes that exist in our sport today towards GLBT athletes. From professional teams to amateur rec-leagues and from high schools to colleges, gay athletes still face exclusion, stigma and abuse. GForce's mission is to help change minds and lead a paradigm shift toward a more open-minded understanding of the GLBT athlete. What better way to do it in one of the toughest sports and with an all-star group of players leading the way through very competitive play?"

"We started out playing during Aspen Gay Ski week and we brought up a local Denver gay team. We didn't do too well and lost the first two years. The third year we won, but we knew we had to recruit nationally to stay competitive. So we contacted all the gay teams throughout the country – 20 of them at the time – and



asked them to refer us their best players. Thus we have GForce, and now we have won three years in a row."

Ski Week Celebration

Join *Out Front Colorado*, Baskit Underwear, GForce Hockey Team and Vodka 14 for a Ski Week Celebration from 3 - 6 p.m. on Friday, January 16, with free vodka, underwear giveaways and a meet and greet with the hot guys of GForce. ■

The QBliss Interview:

With Comedian Paul J. Williams

By C. J. Neumann
QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

Introduction: Comedian and entertainer Paul J. Williams has been making people laugh for 20 years. his comedy and performing is what he does best, his side splitting humor is his legacy, but his human spirit, and sense of personal pride, made it easy for QBliss to pick him as our June PRIDE 2006 Cover story, we hope that you will see why, in this interview with Paul J. Williams, we are truly honored to have our Senior Editor and Writer C. J. Neumann interview this great performer and proud sprit of humanity here is The QBliss Interview with Paul J. Williams.

~R. Olivera Jr.

QBliss Editor In Chief / Executive Director

The QBliss Interview:

CJN: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me Paul J.

PJW: My pleasure

CJN: I was doing some research on you and I noticed that the bio on your website, (pauljwilliams.com) that there is little about you before high school. Tell us about where you were born and where you grew up.

PJW: I was born in Monroe, Louisiana, the 3rd of three boys and I am 8 and 10 years younger than my brothers so I am what is affectionately known as an "oops-baby". We moved to Texas when I was 2. My father worked for Firestone and had a reputation for being able to get stores that weren't making money and turning them around so Firestone moved him around. When I was a year old we moved to Shreveport (Louisiana), and then when I was 2 they moved my dad to Texas, to Austin. We were in Austin until I was 6, then they moved my father to San Antonio which is where my parents still are to this day and I spent all of my school years in San Antonio, graduating from high school there and then going off to Baylor where both of my brothers had attended school, getting a business degree. After having two brothers that majored in music, I thought I need to do something different, so I majored in business.



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

PJW: And then I got out of school, suffered two job losses in 3 years because the economy tanked, then I thought, Ok, now I am going to do what I want to do, and that's being a performer.

CJN: Was it always comedy?

PJW: No, I never really thought of myself as a comedian. The first thing that I did was a musical because I was a trained singer from childhood. Both of my brothers were musical and I was learning to read music about the same time that I was learning to read books. So I decided to go into any musical performing that I could, so I got a gig in a national touring company of "A Christmas Carol" that went out for about 6 weeks. Then I came back and didn't know really what I wanted to do, so I thought that I would just do community theater, then I decided that I wanted to try to become a studio singer. I heard that studio singers made good money and I knew that I could sing and that I could blend with a buzz saw if I had to. So I took lessons, and worked on my studio work, spent a fortune on making a demo tape, and I look back on that now and think, uhhgh, why did I do that? And I even went to Los Angeles to peddle myself as a studio singer, but it is a very tight-knit group, anywhere you go, Dallas, LA, and I wasn't able to crack that shell, so I did singing telegrams for about a year and a half, which was certainly interesting.



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: How so?

PJW: I always tell people that it was the best and worst job that I ever had. The best job in that it taught me so much about performing in front of people that I don't know, and the worst job because it could be so frigging humiliating!

CJN: What was the worst experience that you had as a singing telegram?

PJW: The worst experience was...we also did strip-a-grams. I didn't have the body to become a stripper, but I did what they called "comic-strips". You know, some goofy guy stripping down to boxer shorts. I had gotten booked to do a bachelor-ette party and apparently my bosses did not make it clear to these girls that I was not a hunky boy, but I was a comic strip, and they thought that they were getting this big Chippendale stripper, and they were, needless to say, very unhappy, and it was humiliating for me...it's one of those nights I will never forget.

CJN: Consequently was it the last performance as a singing telegram?

PJW: You know, I don't remember when that happened, I remember exactly where it was, just not when it was in my career. I just knew that I had to get out of that and I think that was sometime in 1988. This was also about the time I started to do

temp work just being an office temp. I got into a production of *1776* at a new theater in Dallas that had formed, out of that show *Less Miserable* was formed. That was my former comedy group. *Less Miserable* was formed because the director of *1776*...the theater at the time was near the Oak Lawn area in Dallas, and she said, we need to capitalize on this late night crowd down here, so you all are funny, why don't you put something together. I was like Ughh, I don't want to do this, but that's how the whole comedy thing started.



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: *Less Miserable* was the first comedy show that you had?

PJW: Yes, it was myself, Steven Crabtree, and Pat Skinner. And Steven had already been in a comedy group before with two other women. So he had some sketch ideas under his belt, and I had never done sketch comedy, but I thought I can do this. I didn't know Steven that well, Pat and I were good friends, and Steven said that he thought it was a good idea that we have music behind us to help us with segues, so Pat came along as a piano player. I just kind of took off much to our surprise. We became these little mini celebrities here in Dallas.

CJN: How long ago was that?

PJW: That was '88 to '94, and in the summer of '93 we were performing in Provincetown (Massachusetts) and were sharing a house with a successful lesbian comedian Suzanne Westenhoffer, and she and I took a walk one day and she just said, you know, you all are really funny, it is obvious to me that you are the strong one in the group and you should go out on your own. During this time, the early '90's gay comedy was really the "in" thing, and I said I can't do that, I have to have two other people on stage with me, and she said, no you really need to do this. Well, sure enough I want out on my own, she wrote a couple of jokes for me, gave me encouragement, helped me with bookings, and the rest is history.

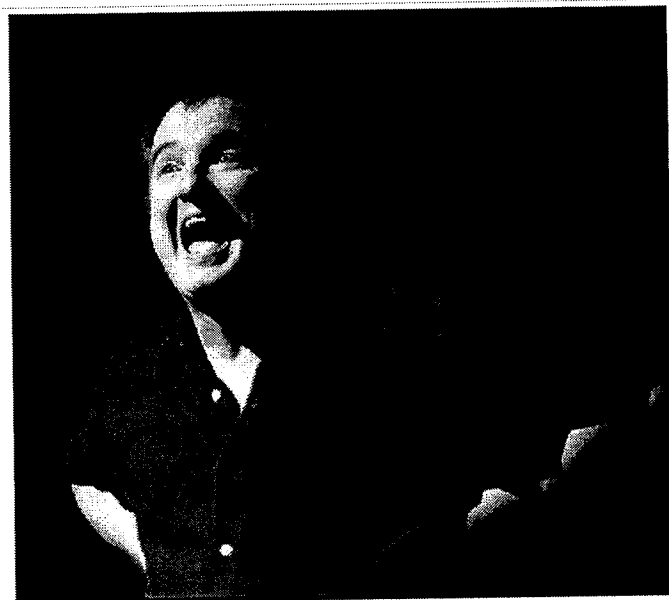


Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: So your first solo shows were just stand up or....?

PJW: My first show was a John Elles, here in Dallas and that was in the spring of '94 and I decided that I wanted to go back to Provincetown on my own. So I did a weekend in New York City at *The Duplex* and then went on to Provincetown where I did a month. That was the summer of '94..

CJN: Your latest show "*Dishing It Out*", when was the first time that you performed that show?

PJW: The first performance of *Dishing It Out* was in October of 2000. I got booked to perform for a gay and lesbian arts fair in Charlottesville, North Carolina called *Out Charlotte*, and they always bring in a male and a female entertainer to be their "artists in residence". He has seen me do comedy and said 'I need you to do two nights, stand up one night, and something different the other night, write something, so something' so I had been tossing this idea around the back of my head of stringing all of my characters together into one show because everyone said that my character work was so strong. Because we had been so successful in *Less Miserable*, one of everybody's favorite sketches was these two food servers at *Luby's Cafeteria*. The only way that I can get anything written is if I am on a dead line and someone is forcing my hand on it. And I knew that I had this deadline coming up in October, so I literally sat down and wrote *Dishing It Out* over the course of a weekend in September of 2000 to premiere in October. Then I brought it back to Dallas in 2001 at *The Pocket Sandwich Theater* and did what I call a showcase version of it, that is I invited my home crowd to come and see this piece that I had written, and then let them give me feedback on it. I had heard that Lily Tomlin did that with her shows, she would do work shops of it and let people talk back, so I tried that to see if I could get any insight, and it really did help. It's amazing where you do a show with no costumes or wigs and you let the audience visualize who these characters are, you get the audience to give you insight to insight that you might have missed.



Photo Courtesy Of C. J. Neumann

CJN: I am sure that feedback like that would be helpful

PJW: It helps open your eyes to things that maybe you missed and helps with character development then I came back later in 2001 and did another run of it at *Franks Place* at the *Dallas Theater Center*, then I did a festival in New York City, I was at *Jumpstart Theater* in San Antonio...Its been performed in New York, North Carolina and Texas at this point.

PJW: Oh, and the other thing that I knew was that I needed to have a 3rd eye, so I got my friend Jay Rogers in New York who was in the original cast of "*When Pig's Fly*" off Broadway, and he is from Mississippi and we were good friends, and I knew that he understood these characters. So I gave him the script and we sat down with it and he gave me a lot of stuff, especially for my red neck character Billy Ed that I couldn't have come up with, and taught me the body movement of the characters and really helping me fleshing it out

CJN: Speaking of Billy Ed and the rest of the characters of *Dishing It Out*, just give us a brief summary of who inspired these characters, were they based on individuals or were they a culmination of several people?

PJW: They are all different. The food servers Maude and Quintessa, Maude was based on all the Luby's women that I had seen growing up. She was an amalgam of these hair-netted women behind the counter. Oddly enough, she was one of the characters that when I did the workshop I got a whole different look on her. In my mind she was young, she was like late 20's, early 30's, the audience was saying, 'No, she's 50!' I was like, really? That helped me add new life to her. Quintessa is an African American woman, she is very strongly based on a woman that I worked with in the Cafeteria on the campus at Baylor, Ann White, now deceased, God rest her soul, but she was so crazy, and so out there, so fun, I just got so much from her, it's where I got Quintessa's speech patters. She is very based on Ann. Billy Ed, I knew that I needed to get another male character, and with my father working for Firestone and coming from Northern Louisiana, there are a lot of mechanics in my family, who are just good 'old boys who have a heart of gold, but maybe not that bright. Billy Ed is kind of a combination of my dad and his brother, and I realize now that it sounds like my dad is not a bright man, but that's not true he actually made something of himself, but he did start out as a mechanic.



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

PJW: There are lines out of Billy Ed's monologue that came right out of my dad's mouth at one point or another. Sister Helen, obviously inspired my Dana Carvey's Church Lady, but on such a different level. I make her so Southern and so Baptist whereas Carvey's was more universal, and obviously based on several women that I knew growing up in the Baptist church. The Reverend, I hate to say was not my original character. That monologue was actually written by Steve Blow the *Dallas Morning News* Columnist. I created the character, but he wrote the words, I patterned him on any number of itinerate preachers that I had heard growing up. Nelda, interestingly enough was inspired by a guy friend of mine. One year for Halloween he dressed up as a character that he called "The Widow". The Widow was any number of Highland Park women, whose husbands had died so they needed to find something



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

to do with their time and make some money so they went into real estate. He was the one that put the gravely voice on her...he said 'you know all of the real estate women in Highland Park, they drive these big Cadillac's and talk like they've been smoking for years. And I liked that idea, and then I thought, I am not going to put her in Highland Park, I am going to take the opposite extreme and put her in the most white trash suburbia neighborhood I can think of. So any town that I go to, I find out where that is and she sells real estate there.

CJN: The other show that you do that is very popular, *Left Out...And Not Right*, came before *Dishing It Out* is that right?

PJW: Right. When I started getting involved with Cabaret work in New York City. Cabaret shows in New York always have a catchy title so you can market it. So I decided that I was going to do stand up comedy, some monologs and a song or two and I needed a catchy title for my show.

And I thought and thought and thought and this one just kind of came to me, and it was so multi-dimensional...I'm left, politically, I'm out of the closet, I was often left out as a child and as we say in the South, I'm just not right. It's a great title for a show.

PJW: Actually the first title of the show in Provincetown was *The Best Little Homo In Texas*. I decided that I didn't want to pigeon hole myself by having Homo in the title, so I softened it down a bit.

CJN: Who were comedians that were inspirations to you? Are they people that everyone would know or not, or a little of both?

PJW: A little of both, but the largest influence was Lily Tomlin. I discovered her when I was in junior high, and that has a big effect on me. To a lesser degree, Jonathan Winters, I remember watching him as a kid and loving all his characters that he would do. I am very inspired by a woman who is a friend of mine, maybe not as well known, but a female comedian named Jill Turnbow who was a friend of mine in Forth Worth. She did 10 or 15 years on the comedy circuit and I thought that she was just brilliant. She was the first close friend I had who got into comedy. Male comics, Robin Williams because he is so off the cuff, but it was not until I got into the business that I started meeting other comedians that had impressed me, but Lily has always been there since day one.

CJN: You have done a number of gay pride events, but what does gay pride mean to you personally?

PJW: Oh Dear...that's a hard question, because I have done so many pride festivals over the years that it has lost its punch, much as I think that pride festivals have lost some of their meaning over the years. Personally from a dictionary standpoint, gay pride means not having to be in the closet and not having to apologize or feel badly for who I am as a gay man. To me the opposite word of pride is shame, which growing up the Baptist church I was taught, gay equal's shame. So gay pride to me is being out of the closet, not hiding who you are, and being proud of it.

CJN: That is absolutely what it should mean but I agree that some meaning has been lost.

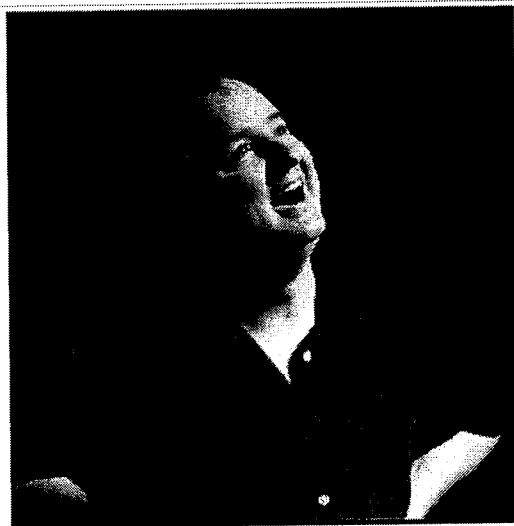


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PJW: Because we have gotten more and more mainstream especially with television, they seem to be more of a celebration as opposed to political statement, or a need to further the cause as it were. I think that gay pride still has a place I just think that it's something that needs to be something that is used wisely. Sometimes I think that people miss the point of gay pride and we do more harm than good.

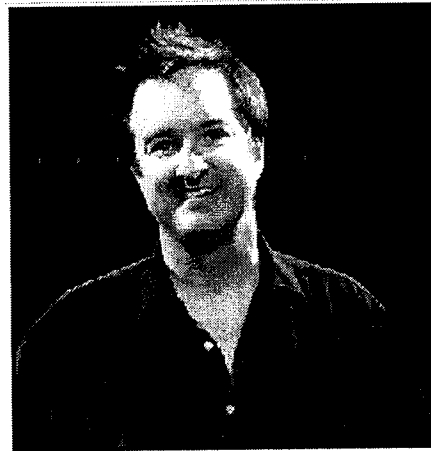


Photo Credit: C. J. Neumann

CJN: Is there anything that you would like to comment about the gay community as a whole? Where do you see it now, and where do you see us going?

PJW: I speak to this issue as someone who lives in Dallas, TX, and someone who has lived in New York City, and the differences between those two gay communities are legion. In New York it is pretty darned easy to be gay because it is very much as live and let live attitude up there and the gay community has a lot more freedom than you do here. Consequently, I think that the gay community in Dallas is exactly that, a community. We are more cohesive, we work for the rights that we get, we don't take anything for granted, and we celebrate the strides we make. Honestly I enjoy being gay in Dallas more than I did in New York, because I don't take anything for granted here, and I did in New York. Now where is the gay community going? I think that answer comes from different places. Worldwide I think we are making strides, but we can never rest and think that everything is hunky-dory, and that is one thing living in Texas that reminds me I live in a red state. I think that we are on the right track because we always have something to fight for. I feel that if we have some cohesiveness and a cause we will continue to move forward until that day when being gay is not an issue and we don't have to fight for it anymore.

CJN: That would be nice and I hope that is in our future. Do you think that it will happen within our lifetime?

PJW: I have no idea, I think that with each generation it gets better. It is better with the younger generation that being gay is not a big issue. I just hope that politics doesn't come in and screw all of that up.



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: What is your ultimate dream of where you want your career to go?

PJW: To host the Oscars. I don't think that it's ever going to happen, but that is my ultimate goal. Beyond that, to be successful as a performer and to make people laugh, nothing brings me greater joy than to make people laugh. To be a little more specific on that, I wish I could make my living full time as a comedian, as a member of a house comedy group somewhere, on the road 52 weeks a year, writing on a show, or performing on a television show. But until then, I have to do a myriad of things to keep a roof over my head.

CJN: You have had a good run with *RSVP Cruises* lately. Are you going to continue that? and are you performing in a show on the ship?

PJW: I'm hoping to, this is still very new for me and so far I am enjoying working for them, they enjoy having me work for them. The contract is up in the fall, but I would be very happy to continue working with them if they choose to go in that direction... Interestingly enough, I don't do a show on the cruise ship. What I am doing for *RSVP* is coming in and helping as host and emcee. They have had the same host and emcee for 20 years, Danny Williams, who is loved by *RSVP* and their passengers, but *RSVP* wants to bring in some new people and as *RSVP* is getting bigger ships they need someone to be able to take some of the load and that is why they are having both of us working now. So, I don't do a show per se, I emcee things, I host, I introduce the headliner entertainers every evening, but I don't get up and do a comedy show for *RSVP*. So when people ask me what show I am doing, I'm not, I am Julie your cruise director.

CJN: Would you like to stay being the emcee or would you like to do both?

PJW: I would like to do both, because people that don't know my work really don't get to see me perform and I'm finding now that after 3 cruises, that I miss having a full 45 minute show every night. But, I am grateful for the job.

CJN: Who was the first person that made you laugh?

PJW: No one has ever asked me before, but I would say Lily Tomlin.

CJN: No one in your family?

PJW: My aunt Ruby. She was my grandfather's sister and she used to go on vacations with us and I can remember she used to look at me across the table and we used to get tickled. She loved to laugh. My grandfather had a great sense of humor too and was always doing silly things. He would be in the car and nothing, and then out of the clear blue grandpa would go, 'At the sound of the tone the time will be 9:00! TPHHHTT!' (*makes a noise*)

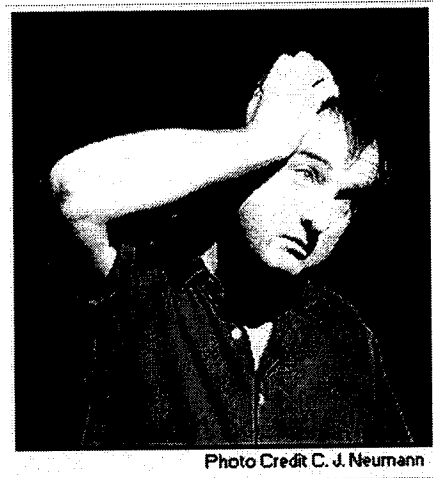


Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: And I am guessing that was...

PJW: No, he would just make a funny noise with his mouth.

CJN: Oh, Ok I thought that he might have been...well passing gas.

PJW: Oh, no, he wasn't a farter. He would make a funny noise and then go back to driving as if nothing had happened.

CJN: If you could have dinner with 3 people, living or dead, who would they be and why?

PJW: Lily Tomlin, I think that the why on that is obvious. Frank Lloyd Wright, I wanted to be an architect when I was a kid and I was mesmerized with his work. He was famously stubborn and artistic, such a visionary. I think that it would just be neat to visit with him. Ok, this is going to be so gay... Bette Midler!



Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

CJN: Of course

PJW: I couldn't decide on Bette or Carol Burnett, I feel so strongly about both of them, but Bette Midler because she was so brassy! She became such a star and known for her brassiness her devil-may-care attitude, and the passion that she lives her life. She has a great sense of humor. So that is a weird threesome. I would love to have dinner with (Former Texas Governor) Ann Richards too. I have met her, but never had dinner with her..

CJN: You have been doing your shows in Dallas, what's next for you? Are you planning on doing a new show?

PJW: The next big thing for me right now is *RSVP*. They just got purchased by *Planet Out* and they have all this money coming in, they are doing more cruises next year and my hope is that I will be busy doing more cruises next year and will be focusing my energy on that. Outside of that I have not thought about a new show. If I were to stay here in Dallas, I would love to do more theater. I can't even audition right now because invariably I have a conflict with scheduling. But with *RSVP*, I love meeting new people every day.

CJN: It's like the gay navy...

PJW: Absolutely! But you know I was thinking about something. The idea of being a gay comedian, what does that mean in the 21st century? I have such mixed emotions, I love the fact that I can identify myself as an out, gay comic, but I don't like the idea of it defining my work. The problem with that is too many comedy club or theater owners, won't book me because they think that I will only attract a gay audience. My experience has been that the straight audiences appreciate my humor as much as the gay audiences.

PJW: Last summer I did a cruise that had 50% gay and 50% older straight couples. The straight couples were getting just as much of a kick out of it as the gay people. So, I know I have an appeal that is broader than just the gay community. And while I covet that gay audience and I don't want to limit it to that. So, I hope that the future of gay comics is that there will always be gay and lesbian comics there for all the gay events that we have around the country, but that we also get the opportunities to break out of that box.

CJN: The shows that I have seen are more universal than people might think... It's not a "gay show".

PJW: Right... YA, lots of club owners will say 'we will put you on our gay night'. That is like telling an African American that we will put you on our 'ghetto night'. Why do we have to have just those nights? I am not going to turn down the work, but let me get in front of an audience. Milton Berle, or was it Bob Hope? Anyway, once said that 'comedy that wasn't real isn't good'. You have to speak about your life. Well, I'm gay, I can't do an act without mentioning that or else my comedy will seem very fake. I will say that a lot of my jokes touch on the fact that I'm gay and honestly I wish that I could write more material that didn't mention that. But then you are trading off on the fact that almost every part of my life reflects that I am gay.

CJN: It's reality.

PJW: It's reality! I once saw Elvira Kurt who is a wonderful Canadian lesbian comic, who does the most brilliant bit on a playground and how they are different when she was a kid and how they are now. I laughed so hard, yet I was so envious of that whole bit, I realized that it was so universally funny and it has nothing to do with being gay or lesbian.

CJN: Thank you Paul J. It has been a pleasure.

PJW: Likewise!

Posted June 20, 2006

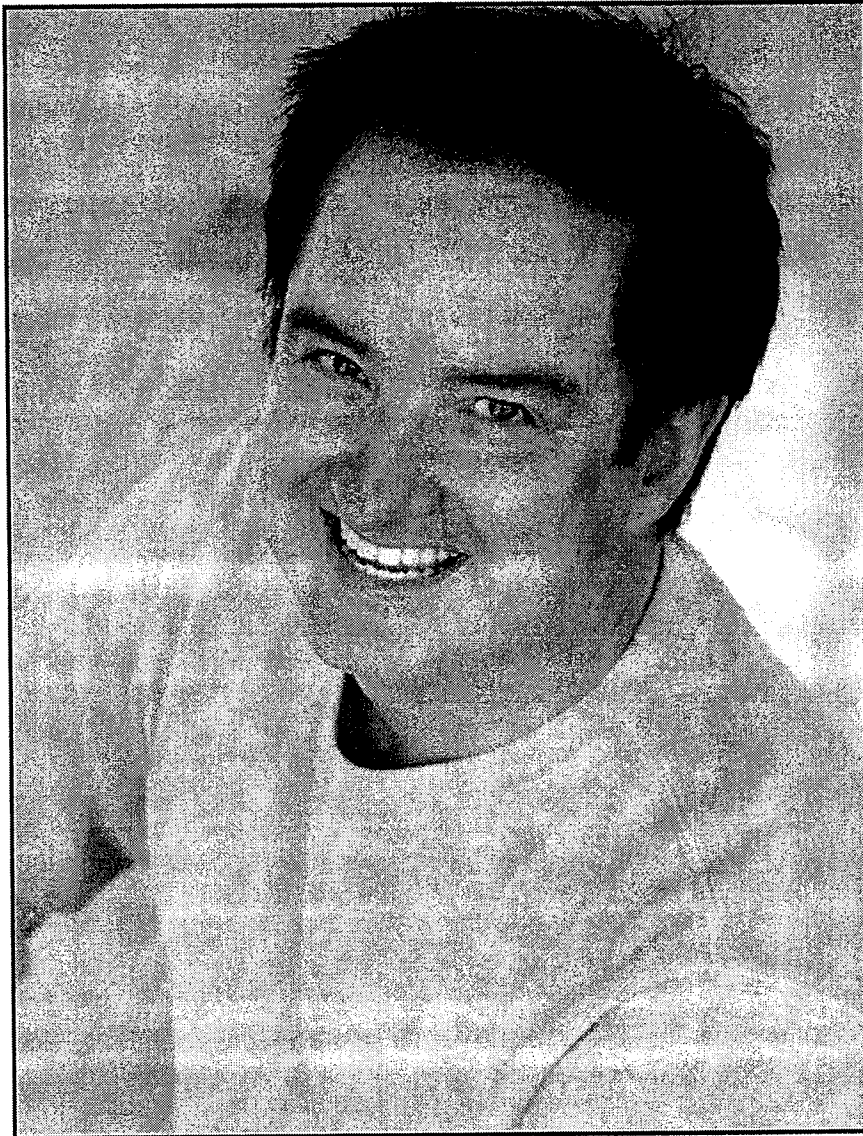
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The QBliss Interview: Paul J. William Shares The "Facts" With Us 2 Years Later!

By C.J. Neumann

QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

Published By QBliss On Sun, 07/13/2008 - 5:13am



Comedian, Singer & Actor Paul J. Williams

Photo Courtesy: Paul J. Williams

QBliss' Senior Editor C. J. Neumann recently sat down with comedian, singer and actor Paul J. Williams. QBliss first featured Paul J. Williams in June 2006, and we are so very happy to share with all our readers just what he has been up to since we last visited with him. Now, here is the QBliss Interview with Paul J. Williams.

C. J. Neumann: It has been just over 2 years since we last talked and at that time you had just celebrated 20-years in comedy. What have you been doing since then?

Paul J. Williams: Continuing on what we had spoken about before and I am still working with RSVP Cruise Lines and have been on so many voyages with them as well as Romance Voyages Cruise Lines. I did a trip to Egypt with them this year. I have not been all over the world, but it

certainly has been a globe-trotting experience. This is the first opportunity to do theater here in Dallas for about 5-years because of all my travels it has kept me from auditioning for anything because I was not home long enough to stay for the rehearsal or the performance period. Most of my comedy has been limited to the work that I have been doing with RSVP and then what ever work I do in and around the Dallas area.

C. J. Neumann: The new show you are in, *The Facts Of Life - The Lost Episode*, why don't you tell us about that.

Paul J. Williams: It was a show that I saw in Provincetown, RI several summers ago. It was written by a friend of mine, Jamie Morris. He is the partner of a very well-known drag performer by the name of Edie. Edie works a lot on Atlantis Cruises and does Provincetown during the

summer and currently, Edie is now the new emcee of the Cirque du Soleil show in Las Vegas, and doing quite well for himself. I saw them do it in Provincetown, it had originally been done in New York. It is a parody of the '80 show, *The Facts Of Life* in which the entire cast consists of men in the women's roles. It is not an actual episode of a show, since that would cause severe copyright problems, it is just based on those characters. Jeff Rain and Craig Lynch who are the producers for the Dallas Uptown Players here in Dallas had asked me if I knew of any shows that they could do as an extra bonus show in their season this year, and I had mentioned to them that I had seen this really fun parody of *Facts Of Life*. Long story short, they went thru the channels and got in touch with Jamie and Uptown decided to produce it here. And of course I wanted to audition for the role my friend Jamie had done, I thought that it would be fun. Certainly, it doesn't take away of the stereotype that all I ever seem to do is play female characters on stage, but I am having a blast.

C. J. Neumann: So this is more than just a drag show...

Paul J. Williams: Oh, absolutely. I think that the fact that all of the roles are being played by guys is secondary to the script and the storyline, but it is a whole lot of fun. It is very bawdy, certainly R-rated, the girls are about to lose their dormitory at Eastland and in order to raise the money to keep it, they turn the dormitory into a whorehouse. So it is sort of *Facts Of Life* meets *Little Whorehouse In Texas*.

C. J. Neumann: You are playing the of Ms. Garret, if Charlotte Rae was able to see the show, what do you think that she would think about it?

Paul J. Williams: [Laughs] I really had not given it that much thought. We have all mused what Lisa Whelchel (Blair in the TV series) would think because she is such a fundamentalist Christian that I am sure that she would be appalled by this. I have a feeling that Charlotte Rae would be amused. What I know about her, she is quite a lot of fun and certainly had an illustrious career in performing. She has performed with the Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus, so being around a bunch of gay boys is not new to her. There are a couple of lines in the show that she delivers that might raise an eyebrow at, but I think it would be fun to have her in the audience. Another thing that Uptown Players did is made the conscious decision to move the performance out of the Blackbox Theater and move it to the Rose Room Theater at Station4, which it known for the place for drag shows. The thinking behind this is that it is such a bawdy show they want people to drink during it, it is kind of a night club act, if you will, even though it is a 2-hour show with an intermission. We were all a little apprehensive on how that would go over, but it has been a marvelous success and a great thing to do as an option to the wonderful drag shows that they do at The Rose Room.

C. J. Neumann: I understand that the show has been extended out.

Paul J. Williams: Ticket sales have been so great that they have decided to put us on an open-ended run. Right now, we are going on thru July 18th, but if tickets continue to sell well, they have asked all of us in the cast to extend as much as we can.

C. J. Neumann: Has there been talk about moving to a larger venue?

Paul J. Williams: No. They are happy with where it is.

C. J. Neumann: Other than *The Facts Of Life* you are still working with RSVP...

Paul J. Williams: Well my RSVP



work has been cut back because they were acquired by Atlantis Events, so now one company owns both of the major cruise companies. Because of that there are only 3 cruises this year, which is the reason I can do this *Facts Of Life* show. I don't have another cruise until November. I am also still booking gigs on the side and in August I am traveling to Washington, D.C., to perform and host the D.C. Bear Invasion. I have worked with them in the past and really enjoy the group. Over Labor Day I am going to Oklahoma City to be headliner for the National Prime-Timers Convention, which is out gay senior citizens.

C. J. Neumann: Are you bringing back the Christmas show this year?

Paul J. Williams: I thought about it, but in addition to the comedy, I am also singing in the Dallas Symphony in their Christmas concert, but I know that I am not doing the concert because they have hired a new producer. It's possible, but the next RSVP cruise leaves on Thanksgiving and comes back December 7th, so it would be hard to pull something together as soon as I get back.

Continued On Next Page >>>

(Use Link Below)

The QBliss Interview: Paul J. William Shares The "Facts" With Us 2 Years Later! Page 2 of 2

By C.J. Neumann

QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

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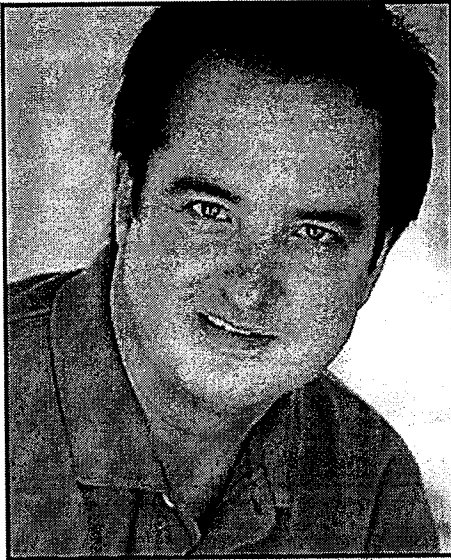


Photo Courtesy: www.pauljwilliams.com

C. J. Neumann: Changing gears a bit on to current events, what are your thoughts about the California gay marriage announcement?

Paul J. Williams: I think that it's absolutely marvelous and it shows a sense of progress and progressiveness on the part of California. I do think that while there is a great amount of rejoicing on this, as we have learned in the past several years, things like this really seem to mobilize those that are against us and I really think that we are going to see a backlash from conservative people, but the good thing is that the more these things happen, the less steam the conservative backlash gets. I certainly think that they are going to respond, but I think that the population as a whole is getting tired of the fundamentalist backlash to all of this. It is a cause of rejoicing, but we can't get lazy and think that the battles are completely won.

C. J. Neumann: Do you think that the State of Texas will follow suit?

Paul J. Williams: Personally I think that is really far down the road. Texas has certainly gotten more "blue", red v. blue, but all in all it is still a very strong Republican stronghold and because of that I don't see it happening. Texas voters passed the amendment to the state constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman, we would have to get rid of that first before we could do anything else.

C. J. Neumann: As it is an election year, do you think that things will get better, stay the same or get worse?

Paul J. Williams: I'm optimistic in thinking that things will get better. I think that the last 8-years with the Bush presidency has taught the American people a lot. I would venture to say that even a great deal of the Republican party are fed up with what is going on in Washington. I am not so sure that the Republicans are that gung-ho on McCain. On the other hand, I think that the primary race has proven to us that the Democratic party is not 100% behind Barak Obama. I would go on record in saying that I was supporting Hillary Clinton. However, I am supporting Obama in the election simply because I read the Republican platform that came out and, not that I am a single issue voter, but they don't have time for gay and lesbian people, and I, as a human being, cannot support that platform. I think that Obama is going to win because the pendulum is swinging back. I do a joke in my stand-up act that is quite ballsy and I joke that the FBI has a file on me, but I keep putting it out there because I am against so much of what Bush has done, but I say that when Bush leaves the White House, and he will leave the White House, he and his family are returning to Dallas, TX. Usually the audience boo's because I am dealing with a home crowd, but I say, "Oh no, I am very grateful about this. I am so excited that when he gets here, I am going to throw him a parade downtown Dallas..."

C. J. Neumann: ...uh oh...I think that I know where this is going...

Paul J. Williams: "...Well you remember what happened the last time that they had a parade for

a president thru downtown Dallas!"

C. J. Neumann: Yeah, no wonder you have a file...

Paul J. Williams: ...and here is former President George W. Bush and....hmm...well, that's that! It is evil, but I can't help it.

C. J. Neumann: The only downside of that joke that anyone under the age of 25 may not get it.

Paul J. Williams: Right! I am always afraid that if I don't get the time to say ...and remember what happened the last time a president had a parade thru downtown Dallas...

C. J. Neumann: Anything else you want people to know?

Paul J. Williams: With 2009 coming, I am not sure what the future holds. With the apparent success with *Logo* and *Here*, the gay specific networks, I am seeing a lot of my peers getting shows on TV. They are significantly younger than I and it seems that it is a timing thing for me, because those things became big when I left New York City. I am frustrated that I am not getting the national exposure, but I remember something that I told myself when I moved back to Dallas. That is; If I am not anything more than a success in Dallas, I will be happy with that, and I am certainly happy with the successes that I have. I am just looking for new opportunities to further my career and name recognition and keep doing what I have been doing for the last 20-years. Maybe someone who reads this may think, hmm, maybe he can come to my home town.

C. J. Neumann: You never know, I hope that happens.

Paul J. Williams: Me too.

C. J. Neumann: Thanks for talking with me again.

Paul J. Williams: My pleasure as usual.

You can purchase tickets for *The Facts Of Life - The Lost Episode* by going to www.uptownplayers.org and you can visit Paul J. Williams website at www.pauljwilliams.com.



Paul J. Williams as "Mrs G" in Uptown Players "Facts Of Life - The Lost Episode"

Photos By: C. J. Neumann

Blair Bitch Project

BOYS WILL BE GIRLS IN *THE FACTS OF LIFE: THE LOST EPISODE*, A RIBALD TRIUMPH OF LOW COMEDY AND HIGH PRODUCTION VALUES

Which of the following was not in an episode of the 1980s sitcom *The Facts of Life*: (a) Tootie announces the onset of puberty by yelling "I'm bleeding down there!"; (b) Natalie is nearly date-raped while wearing a Charlie Chaplin costume; (c) Jo catches a teacher doing cocaine; (d) Blair dates a retarded boy.

BY
ELAINE
LINER

Trick question. These all happened in episodes of the issues-oriented estro-fest, which aired on NBC from 1979 to 1988. Think of *The Facts of Life* as the Junior Miss *Golden Girls*. Except the dotty old broads made out more, were way funnier and had better figures than their schoolgirl counterparts.

If *Facts* is your favorite TV show past or present—good luck with that adult acne, by the way, and yes, it is sad that you still get tingly down there when you see Scott Baio—you'll either laugh yourself sick over *The Facts of Life: The Lost Episode* or think it's heresy. Staged by Uptown Players at Oak Lawn's *Rose Room* (a two-story gay bar that requires the first floor to remain quiet during the show), the two-hour parody-with-music is done in full drag by five male actors who attack their roles with more comic ferocity than the young TV cast ever did. If the girls who originated these characters had been as attractive and comically gifted as the Uptown guys now playing them, they'd still have careers.

The TV series and its R-rated theatrical spoof revolve around Edna Garrett (Paul J. Williams), clucking dorm mother at the tony Eastland Academy girls' school in Peekskill, New York. Her charges, and apparently the only four students living on campus, are: Blair (Chad Peterson), a blond stunner with a huge trust fund, bitchy attitude and bouncy knockers; Natalie (Chris Peterson), an insecure wisecracker built like Chris Farley; Tootie (Cameron Leighton Kirkpatrick), a sprite who scoots around on roller skates and dissolves into spazzy tantrums; and Jo (Kevin Moore), a blue-collar tomboy so butch she has a five o'clock shadow before noon.

In the first act of this "lost episode,"

the evil headmaster (also played by Chris Peterson, who quick-changes through five different parts) schemes to sell the school, raze the dorm and put Mrs. Garrett out of a job. In one of those typically unrealistic turns of plot, the girls brainstorm ways to earn money to save "Mrs. G." Bake sale? Car wash?

Here playwright Jamie Morris starts borrowing ideas from more than the old NBC sitcom. Blending *Risky Business* with *Best Little Whorehouse*, the Eastland four decide to turn tricks to fill the coffers. Act 2 opens with the girls hustling customers (men plucked from the audience, so be ready if you sit up front) in and out of their dorm beds in a scene as raunchy and crisply staged as a good French farce.

There's rarely a second of the Uptown Players' production that isn't gaspingly hilarious. Every character comes more than adequately quipped by Morris. "Being pleasantly plump runs in my family," says Natalie, munching fistfuls of Doritos. Retorts Tootie: "Girl, no offense, but ain't nobody runnin' in your family."

Mrs. Garrett moonlights at her shop, Edna's Edibles, just like on TV. She's named all the coffee drinks after "colorful black celebrities." Any guesses what a "Gary Coleman" might be? (Answer: One short black. And, noting trivia, *Facts* was a spin-off of Coleman's vehicle, *Diff'rent Strokes*.)

These little dollops of drollery serve merely as preambles to the really good, much filthier stuff later on. Referencing sex acts, Morris invents euphemisms that could set the short and curls on end. For lady-parts we get "meat shutters," "beef curtains" and "fruit roll-ups." Self-pleasure with electronic enhancement is described by Mrs. G. as "putting the metal to the petals." Doing it manually is "making your wineglass sing." Comparing notes on technique with the now sexed-up young tarts hanging out in her bakery, Mrs. Garrett remembers her younger days, when she "was as moist as a Sara Lee pound cake."

She gets all the good lines, old Mrs. G. Actor Paul J. Williams, waddling around under 10 pounds of red bouffant beehive, gives some masterful—or would this be mistressful?—line readings. He adopts the quavering delivery of *Facts'* character actress Charlotte Rae ("Gir-rr-rrrls! Gir-rr-rrrls!"), staying just this side of over-the-top. The show stops cold when he comes out with a snapper involving an image of a domestic animal and a direct quote. The line sends the audience into the kind of thundering, rolling waves of laughter rarely heard in Dallas theater. I wheezed so hard laughing

THERE'S RARELY A
SECOND OF THE UPTOWN
PLAYERS' PRODUCTION
THAT ISN'T GASPINGLY
HILARIOUS.



A parody of the '80s sitcom *The Facts of Life*, whose plot turns on four male actors in full drag turning tricks for a boarding school fund-raiser: OMG

at the joke that the guys next to me asked if I was having an asthma attack.

The cast and designers of *Facts of Life: The Lost Episode* have triumphed by doing low comedy with high production values. This so easily could have been reduced to a campy skit that still would have been

The Facts of Life: The Lost Episode
continues through July 13
at the Rose Room. Call 214-219-2718.

fun to watch. But director Andi Allen, costumer Suzi Cranford, wig and makeup master Coy Covington, and choreographer Linda Leonard have put the polish to every detail. When the girls and Mrs. Garrett launch into "Peekskill's got a whorehouse in it," they sing and dance all-out with layers of harmony and complicated steps.

Every one of these sharp performances owes something to the self-conscious eccentricities of the television cast they're imitating. Williams' scarily accurate Mrs. Garrett is matched by Chris Peterson's scarily accurate Natalie, who laughs at everything she says (just like the TV Nat, Mindy Cohn), even when announcing her parents are dead. Kevin Moore's Jo takes on some of Nancy McKeon's swagger, but Moore doesn't even try to be feminine. He's a guy in a girl's school uniform—much the way McKeon played Jo, come to think of it. Cameron Kirkpatrick looks nothing like Kim Fields, but even on skates he manages to capture the original Tootie's flippy emotional instability. Chad Peterson super-sizes all the annoying affectations of the original Blair, Lisa Wheelchel. The exaggerated hair-flipping and Lolita-esque posing become more than visual punch lines; they're comments on the ghastly, amateurish acting

styles acceptable in the sitcoms of yore.

Created by comedy team Jenna McMahon and Dick Clair, *The Facts of Life* offered nine years of thinly written, hammily acted "very special episodes." Like the time Tootie brought home free bong from the record store. "You put jellybeans in 'em!" she said. (She really should have been in special ed.) Mrs. Garrett at first was aghast at the glass tubes, then reconsidered, saying "I don't like to look a gift bong in the mouth." This was TV circa 1985 on a series that unironically titled one of its made-for-TV movie specials *The Facts of Life Down Under*.

Some now-famous actors passed through the halls of Eastland back then, including George Clooney (who had a recurring role and caterpillar eyebrows), Molly Ringwald (cut after the first season), David Spade and Helen Hunt. In one of its later seasons, the show introduced a new character, Blair's cousin Geri, played by Geri Jewell, a stand-up comedian with cerebral palsy. Her presence may have been the writers' attempt to teach young viewers a lesson in acceptance of disabilities, but it provided some of the most awkward and unfunny moments in sitcom history.

The Lost Episode includes "Geri" in a bawdy cameo that so shocked the opening night audience, someone yelled "You're going to hell!" from the back of the house. Yes, they go there and back, and back again and again.

Playwright Morris, who flew in from his home in Las Vegas for first night of the Uptown production, first found success with *Mommie Queerest*, a comedy that "reveals" that Joan Crawford was actually a dude. His next play, *Lucy & Ethel*, will re-imagine the vintage TV pals as Thelma and Louise.

Viewer discretion is advised.

E-mail the author at
elaine.liner@dallasobserver.com.

This episode of 'Facts' didn't make it to TV

You know the song:
You take the good,
you take the bad,
yadda yadda yadda.

You know the characters:
Blair, Natalie, Tootie, Jo and

everyone's favorite house
mom, Mrs. Edna Garrett.

But you can't imagine the
good (and especially the
bad) that goes on in the
Uptown Players' *The Facts of*

Life: The Lost Episode!, now
in an extended run at the
Rose Room. It's neither
what we remember from
the original show nor
anything the FCC would
ever approve of.

Can't quite
remember the TV
show? Here's a

refresher: The
girls are all
away at
boarding
school.

Blair is the
mean, rich
one;
Natalie is
the fat,
friendly
one; Tootie

is the black one; and Jo is
the, um, lesbianish one.
Then there's Mrs. Garrett,
the mom-away-from-home.

The Lost Episode! involves
some antics as the ladies try
to save their house from
impending demolition. We
won't give it away, but let's
just say that one of the big
musical numbers is a nod to
The Best Little Whorehouse



**IAN McCANN &
BRANDON FORMBY**

ORIENTATIONS

The Facts of Life: The Lost Episode!

When: 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and
July 18; 7 p.m. July 20

Where: The Rose Room, 3911 Cedar
Springs Road

Tickets: \$25 at uptownplayers.org.
21 and up only.

in Texas.

When they're not raising
funds, the girls are dirty,
raunchy and spewing
double entendres.

But the highlight is Paul
J. Williams, who does a
great Charlotte Rae.

*E-mail Ian and Brandon
at imccann@quickdfw.com
or bformby@quickdfw.com.*



Uptown Players

From DallasVoice.com

Stage

You take the good, you take the bad

By Arnold Wayne Jones

Jun 11, 2008 - 3:07:14 PM

Williams dons a dress — again — for Uptown's 'Facts of Life' parody

Paul J. Williams likes wearing trousers. He just wishes someone would let him do it on stage. One of Dallas' most hysterical cross-dressing performers, Williams insists he can play a man, or even tackle a serious drama... if only someone would cast him.

"I mean, if I ever saw that Paul J. Williams had been cast in 'Death of a Salesman,' I would laugh," he admits. "But give me a chance."

Until that happens, Williams can take comfort in doing his first ensemble play in several years — even if it does require donning a dress. Because like it or not, comedy is his wheelhouse.

Williams plays Mrs. Garrett, the blowsy housemother at the Eastland School for Girls in "The Facts of Life: The Lost Episode."

In this unauthorized adaptation of the notoriously dykey sitcom, produced by masters of camp Uptown Players, all the girls are played by men: Blair (Chad Peterson), Jo (Kevin Moore), Natalie (Chris Robinson) and Tootie (Cameron Leighton Kirkpatrick).



**Williams as Mrs. Garrett
— dress and all.**

"I'm having a ball doing this — and I know we're doing it well," Williams says.

Williams likens the production to one of the old "Carol Burnett Show" movie parodies in that you don't need to be familiar with the source material to laugh, but being aware of it heightens the humor. And there is definitely a racy edge (see Sidebar).

The production is unique for all involved. Following the success of a benefit performance of "Pageant" two years ago, Uptown decided to mount this "bonus" show of its season at the Rose Room inside Station 4.

"I do think it will be interesting doing the show there," Williams says. "How are our straight patrons going to respond to coming to a gay club to see a show? How are the regular S4 patrons going to react to having us there? It is a drag performance space, and they will be doing a [drag] show after we're done."

But he's not too worried. After all, the outrageous comedy is targeted at the sensibilities of a gay audience. And no one's holding back.

"The goal with [director] Andi Allen is to get her to say 'pull back,'" Williams says. In other words, there's no such thing as overacting until Allen says there is. And the cast is rising to the

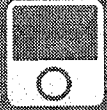
challenge.

“I could not ask for a better ensemble to do this with,” Williams says. “Cameron never even saw ‘The Facts of Life,’ so we had to ‘teach’ him Tootie.” And he’s gotten thrown in with several high-powered gay actors.

“You know the line I don’t have to eat after a show because I chew the scenery? That’s this cast,” Williams says. “I don’t know who’s gonna steal more scenes: Chad or Chris. With Chad, every line delivered is an excuse to pose. He’s never been in drag before, but as Coy Covington said, by the time the show’s over, he’ll have a vagina.”

As for his own performance, Williams is trying to stay true to the original Mrs. Garrett, but it’s harder than he imagined.

“I’m intentionally overdoing the whole Midwestern accent, but my fear is crossing over from Charlotte Rae to Jean Stapleton,” he says. “There’s a fine line between Mrs. Garrett and Edith Bunker.”



DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION:
Paul J. Williams, left, and Coy Covington react to sharing their Readers Voice win for best actor.

It probably says something significant about the gay community than when voting for their favorite male actor, readers split their choices between two men best known for donning dresses. Although Paul J. Williams, left, and Coy Covington ply their stagecraft sparingly — each appears in a handful of productions every year — virtually every time one trods the boards he leaves a red mark on the funny bone. How could you not vote for them?

But aside from their cross-dressing comic chops, their styles distinguish each of them. First there's the fact one (Covington) is blond, the other (Williams) brunet: the Chrissy and Janet of Dallas theater.

Covington's forte is dry ironic melodrama. He's

stolen the show in several Charles Busch plays, such as "Red Scare on Sunset" and last year's "Die Mommie, Die!" at Uptown Players (which Busch himself saw, and for which he gushed about Covington's interpretation). Covington effortlessly howls in exaggerated pain and boundless joy, but never without finding his key-light. And when he pulls on a pair of trousers and tailored jacket over his slender frame for a "straight" performance, it's as if Fred Astaire has been inhabited by the soul of Robert Benchley: Funny and elegant.

If Covington is uptown, Williams is downtown. Williams' humor is organic and quick-witted. Although well-known as a stand-up comedian, he's really more an actor with a comedy routine. When

he performs his signature character, the frumpy Right Wing bible-thumper Sister Helen Holy, it's a form of guerrilla theater. He grills audiences about their religious background, shooting off hilarious barbs with machine-gun speed, improvising as expertly as another funny Williams (Robin). But he can act, too, as he proved early this year when performing "Revolutionary Costume for Today" from "Grey Gardens" at Uptown Players' "Broadway Our Way."

Say what you want about the heft of Broadway or the fleshy realism of Chicago theater. If it's wrong for Dallas to love two comic cross-dressing actors, we don't want to be right.

— Arnold Wayne Jones

DANIEL A. KUSNER/Dallas Voice

BEST LOCAL ACTOR — TIE

Coy Covington

Often performs with *Uptown Players*. In 2007, starred in "Die Mommie, Die!" (Apr. 13-May 6) at the KD Studio Theatre, 2600 N. Stemmons Freeway, Suite 180
uptownplayers.org



Paul J. Williams

In 2007, Williams wrote and starred in "From Fifth Grade to Fabulous" at WaterTower Theatre's *Out of the Loop* festival, March 9 at the Addison Theatre Center, 15650 Addison Road.

The show was also presented by Uptown Players at KD Studio Theatre, 2600 N. Stemmons Freeway, Suite 180
pauljwilliams.com



GET 'FABULOUS'

Paul J. Williams (left) and Mark Alan Smith (right) will perform *From Fifth Grade to Fabulous* on Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. at KD Studio Theater, 2600 Stemmons Freeway, Suite 117. General admission tickets are \$20. Call 214-219-2718.



Two for the show

Paul J. Williams and Mark Alan Smith's entertainment career paths took the two men in different directions after they met in fifth grade in San Antonio.

Williams became an actor, singer and comedian who made a name for himself as a comic in New York cabaret shows. Smith went on to become a renowned vocal impressionist who can mimic everyone from *South Park's* Eric Cartman to Carol Channing.

The two remained friends as they meandered across the country performing. Both now work together for RSVP Vacations - Williams as host and cruise director and Smith as a headliner on Holland America Cruises.

And after they ended up in Dallas, they began talking about doing a show together - since their careers had turned out so fabulously and all.

"I went, 'that's the title right there - *From Fifth Grade to Fabulous*,'" Williams said

They performed *Fabulous* earlier this year at the Water Tower Theater's Out of the Loop Festival. All three scheduled shows sold out, and a fourth was added because of demand.

"We wanted to do this just for ourselves just to say we'd done a show together not really knowing if anyone would come or appreciate it," Williams



IAN McCANN and BRANDON FORMBY

ORIENTATIONS

said.

This weekend, Uptown Players will present another three-performance run at the KD Studio Theater.

The two-man show even features their elementary school song - the words to which Williams still remember.

"Paul never forgets anything about school," Smith said. "Ever. He doesn't forget a thing or a person."

Rather than write and stick to a rigid script, the two individually developed their own portions of the show, which Williams said ended up intertwining nicely. And Smith promises to channel a few of his favorite celebs.

"It's all just whoever pops out of my mouth at the time," he said. "They call me Sybil."

Ian and Brandon's cruise-ship cabaret show is on the Lido Deck. E-mail them at imccann@quickdfw.com and bformby@quickdfw.com.

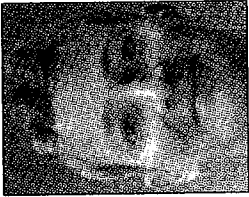
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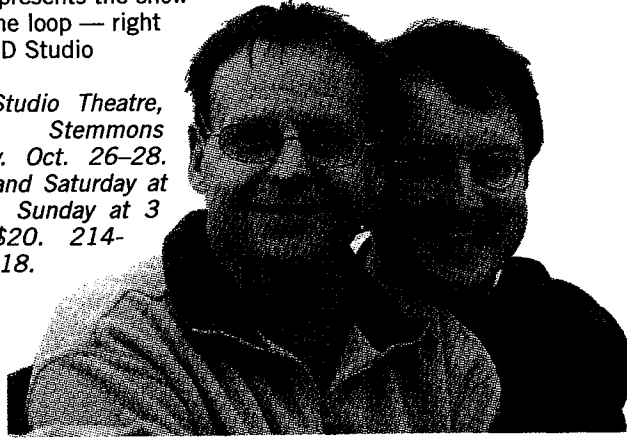
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THE PREMIER SOURCE FOR LGBT DALLAS/FORT WORTH

cabaret

Williams, Smith explain journey from friends to 'Fabulous'

Who'da thunk it: Two good, young Texas boys who meet in the same fifth grade class would grow up to be some of the most notorious entertainers in North Texas — and both famous for doing their best work in a skirt. Paul J. Williams and Mark Alan Smith have been pals for more years than either would care to admit, with each achieving success on the boards: Williams instantly recognizable as Sister Helen Holy, Smith doing Liza better than Liza. They have teamed up again for "From Fifth Grade to Fabulous," their hit cabaret show that played at the Out of the Loop Festival earlier this year. This time, Uptown Players presents the show *inside the loop* — right in the KD Studio Theatre.

*KD Studio Theatre,
2600 Stemmons
Freeway. Oct. 26-28.
Friday and Saturday at
8 p.m., Sunday at 3
p.m. \$20. 214-
219-2718.*



QA

Questions & Answers

WITH

Paul J. Williams



Paul kept his creative side happy in school by immersing himself in voice lessons and band. After graduating from Baylor, Paul utilized his business degree working in Dallas. But his real love was performing. He says the best and worst job he ever had was at Eastern Onion, singing telegrams in the '80s. "I learned to perform in front of strangers, but it was sooo humiliating!" He soon found his way to community theaters.

He teamed up with Pat Skinner and Steven Crabtree to form a successful cabaret/improv group called *Less Miserables*. This is where he used his talent to invent original characters. And we do mean "characters"; especially various southern women!

Paul took his show on the road to New York for six years and won a nomination as Outstanding Male Comic. He is back in Dallas and just completed a run at the Water Tower Theater in Addison called "Dishing it Out!" where he played six different parts. Recently Paul was hired as host/emcee of RSVP Vacations, allowing him to travel the world on cruise ships. This year marks his 20th year in show biz.

(Continued on page 5 B)

BY: SALLY BLANTON

Paul J. Williams

QA

Questions & Answers



Happiness is to be surrounded by good friends.

Where were you born and where did you grow up? Do you have siblings?
I was born in Monroe, Louisiana, and was an "oops" baby, as I have two brothers who are 8 and 10 years older than me!

What is something interesting about your birthplace or hometown?
Monroe was always the site of the Miss Louisiana pageant. Also, the birthplace of Delta Airlines.

What were some fun times you recall with your parents?
My most fun experiences with my parents have been in my adult years. I took them both to L.A. for Christmas a few years ago, and enjoyed playing tour guide for them and showing them "the glamorous life" of L.A.

Did you have a childhood ambition?
For years, I wanted to be an architect and would design elaborate homes on pieces of blank paper. As I got older, I realized that I didn't like math enough to study architecture, and would probably be stuck designing hospitals and schools instead of fabulous houses, so I gave all that up.

What are some memorable things about your teenage years?
Oh lord...it was the '70s I have to reflect on THAT???

What do you love about your job today?
Define "job"! I keep a "day job" as a legal secretary in order to keep money coming in, but my passion is as a performer. I have recently been hired as host/MC of cruises for RSVP Vacations and I spend a great deal of time on ships. I LOVE doing that job as it allows me to travel, perform, and constantly meet new people. To me, it's the perfect job!

What has been your proudest moment?
There are so many moments that have made me proud, it's difficult to name just one. I guess I'm most proud of the fact that I come from a supportive family.

What do you know for sure?
That I am NOT a Republican!

What are ten things you are crazy about?

Tex-Mex food, 80s music, laughter, my friends, my family, Lily Tomlin, travel, classic autos of the early 60s, singing, and architecture.

What is your wildest dream?
To host the Oscars

Who are some favorite performers?
Lily Tomlin, Bette Midler, Carol Burnett, Lewis Black, Phillip Seymour Hoffman

What was your favorite concert so far?
Bette Midler at Madison Square Garden

What is something you wish you had accomplished earlier in life?
Anything related to performing... sometimes I wish I'd started earlier.

People don't know that you were once...
on Wheel of Fortune as a contestant

What could you eat every day and not tire of?

Tex Mex...but I'd be BIG AS A HOUSE!

Do you have some favorite Dallas restaurants?
Uncle Julio's, Celebration, Chez Gerard, Toulouse

When you "go out" what are some good things to do in Dallas?
Anything at Uptown Players or Water Tower Theater

What are some beautiful places you have seen in this world?
The Canadian Rockies are breathtaking; Monte Carlo is so "over the top" that it's fun; Kauai is the most beautiful of the Hawaiian Islands; but above all, Salzburg is my most favorite destination in the world!

What have you seen that was breathtaking?
See above...the Canadian Rockies...driving from Calgary to Banff.

Do you have a favorite quote?
"That which annoys us in others is often that which annoys us

most in ourselves"
What do you splurge on?
Restaurants!
Where do you find the best bargains?
The outlet mall in San Marcos

What makes you say "Wow!"?
Incredible live performances, whether it be music or stage. Most of the time, it's a pipe organ heard in an architecturally majestic cathedral. Now THAT makes me say WOW!!

What do you think you will be doing in ten years?
Finding ways to continue to follow my passion in life of making people laugh and being a performer.

What is your exercise regimen?
Clearly, not enough! I love to ride my bike on the Katy Trail.

What do you do to stay centered?
Keep close to my friends and family. And remember that there is a Higher Power watching over me.

What is unfathomable to you?
Child abuse

What is a material item that you treasure?
My photographs.

Name a famous person or two that you have met.
Lily Tomlin, Ann Richards, Estelle Getty, Liza Minnelli

What was an unforgettable event you have attended?
I lived in New York City on 9/11, 2001. I will never forget that or the days following.

If cost was not an object, what would you buy tomorrow?
A home in Preston Hollow!

What are several movies that you loved?
9 to 5, On Golden Pond, Steel Magnolias, Contact, Big Business, Auntie Mame

Do you collect anything?
Not as much as I used to, but I have quite a collection of penguins

The world wide web is...
My link to the world.

Life is...
a journey we take with many other people.

Happiness is...
to be surrounded by good friends.

By: Sally Blanton

Paul Williams is latest to take the Hamburger Mary's stage

By Buddy Early

It's been nearly a decade since Paul Williams has performed his comedy for a Valley audience. On Jan. 29, he returns to Phoenix and will perform at Hamburger Mary's, which is owned by Williams' good friend Curtis Steinhoff.

Steinhoff and the rest of the crew at Mary's expect 2006 to be a year in which they will keep their customers entertained, as Williams kicks off what promises to be a busy schedule for them.

"I'm looking forward to coming back," Williams told *Echo*. "The people are friendly. I love the gay community there. I've met so many great people. If it weren't so damn hot, I'd move there."

Williams estimates that 75 percent of his shows are for gay audiences, at places like Hamburger Mary's.

"It's a combination of a conscious choice and kismet," he said, pointing out that comedy club owners operate with a "good ole boys network," which has led him to seek out gay venues.

His material, which draws from his upbringing as a repressed homosexual Baptist in Texas, appeals to both gay and straight audiences.

"I'm always pleasantly surprised when I do 'straight audiences' and they eat me up in a spoon," he said.

And those straight audiences have shown their appreciation. While living in New York City, Williams racked up three consecutive nominations (2000-2002) for Outstanding Male Comic from the Manhattan Association of Cabarets.

In 2003, Paul decided it was time to return to his Texas roots and he left the bright lights of New York for the bright sunshine of Dallas. A new show, "Dishing It Out" is a one-man tour de force in which Paul portrays six different characters interacting in one afternoon in a Southern cafeteria.

For his stand-up act, he retains a number of the characters he has created throughout the years, but says he waits until the last minute before deciding what to include in each set. For his Hamburger Mary's gig, he says "I won't even decide what I'm going to do until I get on the plane."

One topic you can expect from him, however, is religion.

"I don't want to bash Christianity as a whole. I just want to bash the really stupid, narrow-minded idiots out there," said Williams. "I always say ... I'm very fervent about the fact that there are good Christian people out there, (but) every community has its freaks."

Aside from that, all he could say about his act was that is "is about the fact that I am who I am."

Although many comedy club owners are still afraid to put up a "gay" comic, Williams says he would never "put a lid on" his sexual orientation, even if it might cost him work. Since "Gay Night" at clubs are actually less frequent today than a decade ago, being labeled as a



He knows funny:

Paul Williams tickles funnybones at Hamburger Mary's on Jan. 29.

"gay comic" can carry a stigma that owners want to avoid.

But don't feel sorry for Williams; his comedy career is going just fine. In fact, this year he will begin work as emcee for all RSVP Vacations cruises around the globe.

So work as a gay comic is not so bad, if you can get it.

Williams' show on Jan. 29 begins at 9pm, with no cover charge. Hamburger Mary's is located at 5111 N. 7th St., Phoenix. For more information, call 602-240-6969.

Celebrate Free Speech

Did you know there's not a single monument of the Bill of Rights anywhere in America? Air America Phoenix and the Foundation Foundation are trying to change that. A benefit concert at the Tempe Improv will celebrate free speech rights, with all proceeds going to help install the nation's first Bill of Rights Monument here in Phoenix! Chris Bliss and Letterman favorite Wayne Cotter, along with Charles Goyette and surprise guests highlight the Jan. 24 show.

Tickets for the 18-and-over benefit, which begins at 8pm, are \$30, with a two-item minimum (food or beverage) per person.

The Tempe Improv is located at 930 E. University Drive, Tempe. For more information, call 480-921-9877.

-E



ARTS DAY:

Meadows Museum taking an in-depth look at Texas artists' vision. 14E

Columnist Alan Peppard has the day off.

Divergent paths

'Left' stays on course with humor but lasts too long

By TOM SIME
Staff Critic

Paul J. Williams seems to want to be Andy Williams with the Christmas version of his act *Left, Out ... and Not Right!* Holding forth in an avuncular red sweater and presenting a couple of musical guest stars, he

THEATER REVIEW

tells mildly ribald jokes, sings Christmas songs with parody lyrics ("It's the most fattening time of the year") and talks about "a family that I love a lot."

We could be watching TV in 1963. But this is a gay one-man show, so one of the musical guests is a Judy Garland impersonator, and for the second act, this Mr. Williams changes into black leather pants.

The title of the show refers to the star being left of center politically, out of the closet, and "just not right," in the tradition of his "white trash relatives."

Over the course of the evening, he talks about Southern Baptist code ("creative" means "homosexual"), Carnival cruises ("I didn't know mobile homes could float") and politics ("Would the last Democrat out of Washington please turn out the lights?").

It's harmless and for the most part charming, and even — sometimes — pleasantly biting. Mr. Williams' primer on how to fake speaking in tongues is hilarious. And his self-mocking humor can be one-liner pithy ("I have a washboard stomach; I'm just doing a load of towels right now"). Lee Harris brings his own jaded piano-bar panache to his role as ivory-tickling sidekick.



JASON JANIK/Special Contributor

Paul J. Williams is mostly charming in *Left, Out ... and Not Right!* at the Trinity River Arts Center.

Acting out

Paul J. Williams gives 'Just Jack' a run for his money

By Robert Ross
Contributing Writer

"I play a flamboyant queen in *Down South* and don't feel a bit guilty about creating a stereotypical gay character," Paul J. Williams admits as he talks about his role in Uptown Players' new production. "When I first saw the play in New York I said I'd kill to do the show."

That wasn't necessary after all. He got the part fair and square. Coming home to Dallas not long ago after six years in New York, gay actor and comedian Williams is busy re-establishing himself — in the stand-up comic realm and on the stage. But back to the guilt-free, flamboyant queen.

"In spite of its title, *Down South* doesn't have anything to do with geography," Williams explains. "It's set in 1962, so my character Stephen Stevens is typical of the era. Besides, he's married, and as everyone knows if you are married to a woman you can't be gay, but you can act queenly and no one will be suspicious. Anyway, when people ask me what *Down South* is like, I tell them it's a *Dick Van Dyke* show on acid."

That clears up everything.

Williams grew up in San Antonio in a traditional Baptist home. In his first year of high school he did a Lily Tomlin number for a talent show, which led the drama teacher to encourage him to get into acting, but he chose music instead and didn't turn into a high school drama queen. Shipped off to Baylor University in Waco, like his brothers before him — both church music directors now, Williams majored in business and shunned frivolous and worldly pastimes like singing and acting.

"I was really trying to please my father who had two musicians for sons and longed for one good businessman," Williams explains. "Then I got out of college in the 1980s when the economy was lousy and I couldn't get a job in business, so I thought if I were going to be unemployed I might as well be unemployed doing what I liked. That's how I got into acting."

Williams says he came out while at Baylor — or as he calls it, "Jerusalem on the Brazos." Of course, coming out in Waco doesn't do much good, so Williams remembers frequent trips to Austin and Dallas where the pickings were more abundant. Satisfied by what he had discovered north of Waco, he settled in Dallas after graduation.

Having dispatched his short-lived business career to the wings, Williams started out humbly in his alternative profession by deliv-



You mean like David Gest? in the Uptown Players' *Down South*, Williams plays Stephen Stevens, a queen who just happens to have a wife.

ering singing telegrams. He then developed a comic routine called "Sister Helen Holy," also unofficially known as "the church lady" or as "hell 'n holy." Before long, Helen caught on and was invited to entertain at parties and private functions, which helped her creator to establish himself as an entertainer.

"The six years with *Less Miserable* are really memorable ones," Williams remarks, recalling the success of the comedy act that Pat Skinner, Steven J. Crabtree and he created in 1988. "The first night when we performed at what was then the Forum Theater there were five people in the audience. We did a lot better after that and took the act all over the country. I always described it as a cross between *Saturday Night Live* and *The Carol Burnett Show*."

But you can't be *Less Miserable* forever, so the trio went their separate ways. Crabtree is currently performing his own show, *Dysfunctional Divas*. Williams has developed two other one-man comedy routines. *Dishing It Out* chronicles the life and times of a Texas cafeteria server and her customers, while *Left, Out ... And Not Right!* takes up his survival as a gay "recovering Baptist."

"I've performed *Dishing It Out* all over to all kinds of audiences," Williams says. "It's so clean that I call it my Sunday School show. It's

good to have something in my repertoire that's not gay oriented like *Left, Out, ...* is."

Having worked up from a singing telegram virtuoso to an established comedian in the Dallas entertainment scene, Williams decided it was time for the big time. In 1997, he left for New York with his friends giving him a lavish party at the Anatole. After such a send-off, he admits thinking that if the New York venture turned sour he could never come back to Dallas. But he did.

"I feel differently now," Williams stresses. "Although I didn't get on Broadway, I don't consider myself a failure, because I did very well on Manhattan's cabaret scene, even got nominated three times by the Manhattan Association of Cabarets as 'Outstanding Male Comic.' Besides, I missed Dallas, especially the

grocery stores that are so big you can't see the back of them because of the curvature of the earth. In New York the bug spray and the bread are on the same shelves. That's just not right."

Even the dullest person couldn't spend six years in New York without collecting a few stories. And Williams is anything but dull. Maybe his favorite anecdote concerns a street person he saw one day. That's not unusual, but this one was carrying a sign emblazoned with a Star of David and the inscription, "Homeless Hermaphrodite." Williams recalls thinking to himself: "There's a circumcision that went wrong." ▼

Trinity River Arts Center, 2600 Stemmons, Suite 180. Aug. 15-31. Thu.-Sat. at 8 p.m., Sun. at 2 p.m. \$20-\$22. 214-219-2718

Good Afternoon and Welcome. Today's date is Sunday, June 18, 2006. The time is 4:10 PM (16:10)

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Coming Soon!
A QBliss Music Feature On
Naked Highway



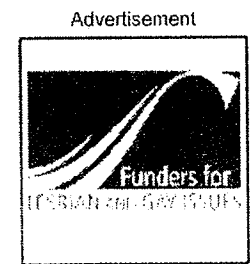
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BALTIMORE THE MEN'S CHORUS

COVER STORY

JUNE 2006

Comedic Pride: Paul J. Williams, 20 Years of Laughs and Pride!

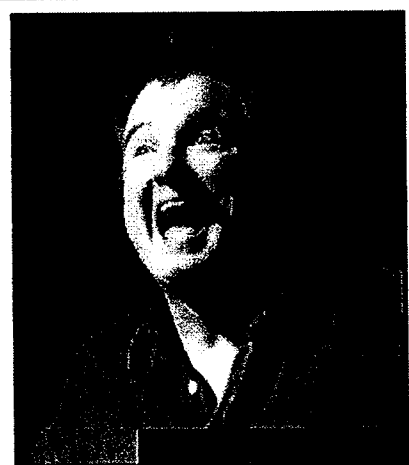
By C. J. Neumann
QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

"I'm from Texas, I'm a Southern Baptist, I'm gay and I'm still alive!" quotes Dallas-based comedian Paul J. Williams. Gay? Baptist? In TEXAS?? Yes, they do exist!

QBliss has chosen Paul J. Williams for our June PRIDE Month Cover story because of his comic brilliance and his honesty with himself and others, being out and proud, and having a true sense of PRIDE.

Born in Louisiana (stating that he was an "oops-baby") and growing up in Texas, Paul J. Williams was always a creative type and a performer. And as such he was in band, choir, and drama in high school. As a self described wimp, nerd and fag he learned to fight back, but his weapon of choice were words and a lightning quick wit that he used as a self-defense mechanism. Now he has honed that talent of words and uses it for the sake of making other people laugh, sometimes at his own expense.

Always musical and from a musical family, he originally was trained and wanted to be a studio singer but with several disappointments he started doing singing telegrams that he calls the best and worst job that he ever had. Best in that it taught him how to perform in front of people, and worst because it could be so humiliating. Soon after he was part of a comedy group at the prompting of a theater manager. Though not too excited at the idea at first, the team took off much to his surprise and became an instant hit in Dallas. After a few years in a team, he took out on his own and has not looked back.



Photos Courtesy Of C. J. Neumann

Cover Story Continued On Next Page >>>

Posted June 18, 2006

Good Afternoon and Welcome. Today's date is Sunday, June 18, 2006. The time is 4:09 PM (16:09)

QBliss

Coming Soon!
A QBliss Music Feature On
Naked Highway



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Cover Story

JUNE 2006

Comedic Pride: Paul J. Williams, 20 Years of Laughs and Pride! (Continued)

By C. J. Neumann
QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

He has performed several roles in local theater groups and has had two smash hit shows, *Left Out...And Not Right!* and *Dishing It Out* that he performs as a one man show. He was nominated for the *Manhattan Association of Cabarets (MAC) Award as Outstanding Male Comic*, in 2000, 2001 and 2002 for *Left Out...And Not Right!* and has performed *Dishing It Out* in Dallas, New York, and North Carolina, and has performed stand up at Aspen's gay Ski Week, Provincetown, *Key West Arts Festival*, *RSVP Cruises* and *Club Med*. This year, Paul J. Williams celebrated 20 years of performing.



Photos Courtesy Of C. J. Neumann

Williams finds humor in just about everything from right wing zealots and narrow minded "church ladies" to simple hash slinging line servers at your local cafeteria to current events. His humor can be described as somewhat sarcastic at times, but is never cruel or belittling to anyone and can also make you think about how life can truly be.

Williams has been seen all over the United States in theaters and comedy clubs and if you have the chance to see him, you absolutely should. He is one of the funniest people that I have ever seen and talked to and if you see his one man show, you will laugh so hard that your sides will ache.

If you would like to know more about Paul J Williams, come back on June 20, 2006 and read the QBliss Interview with him and visit his web site at www.pauljwilliams.com.

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Posted June 18, 2006

Day in the life of a comedian

JENN YATES

Editorial Editor

"At an early age, I realized people were laughing at me. I decided, hey, I might as well try to be funny!" Lilly Tomlin said that at the start of her comical career. That is also one of comedian Paul Williams' favorite quotes.

Alternating between work and fluctuating gigs has become somewhat of a routine for Williams. He has been in comedy for about 12 years. He first performed with a three-man comedy troupe called "Less Miserable" for six years. Then in the summer of 1993, a fellow comedian urged Williams to try a solo act. Williams decided to go on his own as a stand-up comedian in March 1994 and has become very successful.

Growing up, Williams was not always the "class clown." "Back in high school I was very 'artsy'. I was into choir, drama, and even band. However, I didn't believe in fighting to defend myself, so I learned how to have 'comebacks' for anybody who felt the need to be snide to me. It eventually developed into a very quick sense of humor."

Early on, Williams wasn't thinking of becoming a comedian. Since he wasn't doing too well in his post-college career, he decided he wanted to do something in performing arts. Comedy developed out of that. Since being a stand-up comedian is not a nine to five job and the money varies from gig to gig, Williams

does work as a legal secretary at

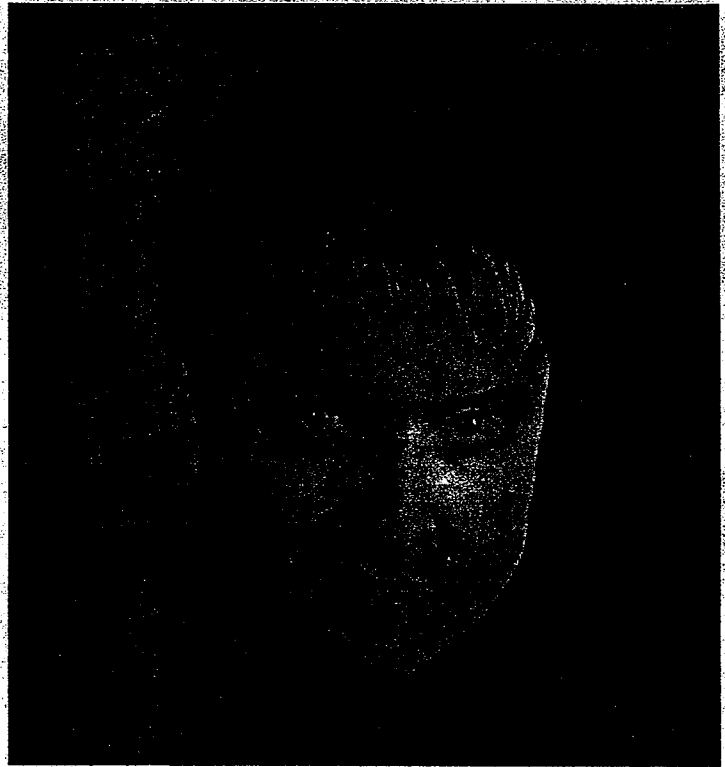


Photo courtesy of Paul Williams

Paul Williams makes his money making people laugh.

the third largest law firm in New York City. Williams says it's only a temporary job. "It gives me the flexibility I need if I go out of

town for a gig or something. Most of my performing is on the road, so it's a good thing to have a flexible occupation."

Williams also likes to perform for larger crowds rather than smaller ones. "With a lot of people, there will always be someone who'll find what you think is funny. So

there really is no "down time."

Throughout all that Williams has done in his career he still has a goal to have his own sitcom. Williams has been most influenced by Tomlin. "She has always been my inspiration for her ability to do great characterizations. I think she's brilliant. I also like Robin Williams and Ellen DeGeneres."

Williams has some advice for aspiring comedians, or any aspiring entertainer for that matter: "First and foremost, you have to believe in yourself. Any career in the entertainment business is *very* difficult, and it's *not* all glamour like you see on TV. However, if performing is something that you feel passionate about, and you believe that you have a gift, whether it be singing, acting, music, or comedy, then go for it!"



Photo courtesy of Paul Williams

Williams at a club in NYC.

Bistro Bits

By Roy Sander

COMEDIAN PAUL J. WILLIAMS TOP-NOTCH show at *Don't Tell Mama* delivers an hour filled with laughter and smiles. (Remaining performances are Tues., Jan. 27, 9 pm; Tues., Feb. 3, 7 pm; Thurs., Feb. 19, 7 pm). It centers around his Southern Baptist roots and his experiences as a gay man, both in his native Texas and in his adopted home, New York City. I had a wonderful time. First, because Williams is very funny—whether discussing the early telltale signs of his sexual orientation, observing the differences between Texas and New York, critiquing the residents of Chelsea, commenting on Internet dating, or portraying Nelda Pickens, a real-estate saleswoman transplanted from a Texas trailer park to Hoboken, N.J. Second, because although Williams's technique is artful, it never obscures the person underneath: genuine, intelligent, sensible, and appealing.

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THE ARTS

Overnight

■ Columnist Helen Bryant has the day off

Tuesday, August 24, 1999

The Dallas Morning News

THEATER REVIEW

Williams' insight pans far and wide

Comedy's diverse targets a welcome development

By Lawson Taitte

Theater Critic of The Dallas Morning News

Paul J. Williams' *Left, Out . . . and Not Right!* at Pocket Sandwich Theatre on Monday set a new record for shows about growing up gay and Baptist. It didn't get into sexuality issues for at least 10 minutes.

The gay-Baptist subgenre of performance art has been getting such a run lately that it was refreshing that Mr. Williams had a lot to say on multiple subjects. The San Antonio native, who made a name for himself in Dallas before moving to New York two years ago, returned to a crowd that obviously knew and loved his work.

The wide range of targets kept the set from seeming preachy, though occasionally a joke did just feel thrown in.

The first half of the program was basically stand-up comedy — nearly an hour of it. Mr. Williams warmed up the standing-room-only house with woeful tales about sharing a



Stephen Mosher

RIDING THE RANGE:

Paul J. Williams riffed on a variety of topics in *Left, Out . . . and Not Right!*

name with a couple of more famous people. He then told a lot of New York jokes. He also got back to his roots. When he did get around to his sexuality, most of the jokes were PG-rated — unlike those in many other shows of this sort. He recalled asking for — and getting — Barbie's Dreamhouse as a kid. And then going to the store for contact paper because he didn't like the way it was decorated. He showed his class picture at age 13 — complete with a color print scarf tied around his neck — and asked if it was any wonder his parents had never had to ask him about his sexual preferences.

Before the intermission, Mr. Williams had his former colleague in the comedy troupe *Less Miserable*, Steven J. Crabtree, take a

turn. Mr. Crabtree, in a dark wig, played Martini Glass, a washed-up Hollywood star in the mold of Joan Crawford or Tallulah Bankhead. The account of a party filled with old-line celebrities in compromising situations got a lot of laughs.

After the break, Mr. Crabtree teamed up with Mr. Williams in the first of a series of character sketches. Mr. Williams had assembled them as an audition for a sketch-comedy show on MTV, but many of the figures he portrayed were old friends to his Dallas fans. The second act's opening duo found Mr. Williams and Mr. Crabtree as two serving women in a cafeteria line. The material was like *Greater Tuna*, only bitchier. Afterward, Mr. Williams did his own takes on a black prostitute, a church lady who owed much to (but was subtler than) Dana Carvey's, a gloating preacher and a real-estate saleswoman who lived in a trailer court.

Gay comedy a tough sell

By DEBORAH MARTIN
EXPRESS-NEWS ARTS WRITER

Comedian Paul J. Williams' dream audience is a room full of 35-year-olds who frittered away their formative years in front of the television.

These are his people, people for whom a joke referring to "Miss Jane" as the first lesbian on TV does not need an explanation.

The under-30 crowd, he said, isn't always hip to "Beverly Hillbillies" references. And "Family Affair?" Fuhgetaboutit.

"Twenty-year-olds come up to me after the show and say, 'You're funny, but who's Brian Keith?'" he said.

Growing up in San Antonio, television was a comfort to Williams.

"There's a joke in my show about how, when we're adolescents, if we realize we're different, we think we're a freak and no one else is like us. But I watched TV, so I knew I wasn't the only gay person — I watched 'Lost in Space' and there was Dr. Smith," he said.

Williams' act — which his hometown will get to sample for the first time at a benefit Thursday for the Gay and Lesbian Community Center — draws heavily on pop culture and on his life as a gay man.

The pop culture stuff pretty much sells itself. The gay material... well, that's a trickier sell.

He and some fellow gay comics have a running debate over the best time to introduce their sexual orientation into a set. Is it best to establish it the instant they pick up the mike, or should they start with more general humor and work it in later on?

"I see both sides," Williams said. "Personally, more often than not, I open my act by saying, 'Good evening, my name is Paul J. Williams. I'm Southern, I was raised a Southern Baptist. I'm gay and I'm still alive. Yes, I'm pretty much a "Jerry Springer Show" waiting to happen.' I don't want that fake, 'Oh, he's funny'; then, when they find out you're gay, 'Oh, he's not funny.' I choose to be upfront with it."

Even so, he's sure his honesty has cost him. Comedy club bookers are reluctant to hire him for anything other than gay comedy nights, even though his act doesn't really deal with his sex life. He could probably make a decent living doing nothing but gay comedy nights and festivals, "and I could be a moderately successful star in this community. But that won't shoot me to some L.A. sitcom audition," he said.

Williams isn't all that interested in a show built entirely around him, a la "Seinfeld" or "Ellen." He would rather play the wacky neighbor or best friend.

To make himself more viable to casting directors, he is trying to write his way into mainstream comedy nights. He's trying to come up with general material that won't compromise his identity.

"I heard Bob Hope once say that comedy has to be true. And if it's not, it's going to come across as so fake," he said. "I'm not going to go onstage and talk about 'my girl-friend' or 'my wife.' Let's say I don't talk about dating; I could do a whole set on nothing but current events. I know it's possible; I just have to concentrate (on the writing). And that will help my chances in getting that crossover."

Williams has been trying to make a splash as an entertainer for more than 10 years, starting in Dallas. It wasn't quite the life he mapped out for himself after he graduated from Robert E. Lee High School. Out of deference to his dad, who wanted him to pursue a practical profession, he studied marketing at Baylor, then went to work for the old Joske's department store chain.

Then Joske's was bought out.

He went to work for another store, and the

■ See LOCAL/2G

SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS
Funny man Paul J. Williams returns to San Antonio for his first local show.



Local comic's life a perfect fit for a 'Jerry Springer' episode

■ Continued from 1G

same thing happened. After a while, he tired of being laid off from job after job in the fickle world of retail. In 1985, he decided that, if he was going to be unemployed anyway, he might as well be an unemployed performer. He signed up with a temp agency to give himself a steady source of income, and he started writing.

He wrote some one-man shows for himself, including "Don't Tell Mama" and "The Best Little Homo in Texas," and co-founded the now-defunct comedy troupe Less Miserable. He was doing pretty well in Big D, working lots of society events and other shows.

He eventually became a big fish in Dallas. Then, two years ago, he decided to pull up stakes and head to New York.

"I needed to challenge myself and see if I could make it to the next step," he said. "I should have done it at 25, but I think I would have killed myself because it's so hard. But I didn't want to live the rest of my life thinking, 'What if...'"

It's been tough, but he is slowly making inroads and has worked in clubs across the country. He didn't give himself a limit on making his career work — he'll be in comedy as long as it's fun, and it's still fun.

Thursday's San Antonio show

Just for laughs

■ **What:** Comedian Paul J. Williams' performance benefiting the San Antonio Gay and Lesbian Community Center. Vickie Shaw will open the show.

■ **When:** 8:30 p.m. Thursday

■ **Where:** Rivercenter Comedy Club inside Rivercenter mall

■ **Tickets:** \$15 at Half-Price Books, 3207 Broadway; Features, 5309 McCullough; On Main, 2514 N. Main; and the San Antonio Gay and Lesbian Community Center, 3126 N. St. Mary's.

■ **Information:** 229-1420.

marks the first time he has played in a Texas comedy club. Because comedy bookers usually work through a network, he hopes the performance will create some opportunities at other comedy clubs.

"That's definitely in the back of my mind. If I can show myself well there, it could open some doors," he said.

His parents will be in the audience Thursday, cheering him on. They went through a lot to reach this point. They had been extremely concerned when he decided to leave business to pursue

an entertainment career. Then, a few months after that announcement, his mother inadvertently outed him.

"It happened on the phone. We got into this discussion, and she said something to the effect that, 'I hope you're not gay because gay people are going to hell.' And I went off about it, and said, 'I'm sorry you feel that way.' She said, 'What you're telling me is you're a homosexual.' I heard that sound from (the shower scene in) 'Psycho.' And I said, 'Mother, this is not the time and place to talk about it.'"

He ended up pouring his heart out to his parents on an audiocassette so they could deal with his sexual orientation in their own time. Eventually, they came around.

"Everything about my parents' acceptance level with me, from my career choice to sexual orientation, has taken time, but it's been worth the time," he said. "I'm so blessed. My parents fully believe in my gifts and talents. They've always believed if you are given a talent by God, you are wasting it to not use it. That's why my parents have supported me, and why my father, as of late, has become financially helpful to me, which is something he hasn't done in the past."

"They've gone from outright horror at the fact that I'm gay to my mom going to the (Gay and Lesbian Community Center) and picking up fliers to promote this show."

He's Only Just Begun: A Conversation with Paul J. Williams

By Nancy Ford
TRIANGLE Co-Editor

If you were a member of the showtune-and-martini set who frequented the Texas cabaret circuit in the late '80s, chances are you've already met **Paul J. Williams**. As the cornerstone comic of the exuberant musical comedy trio *Less Miserable*, Williams became well known to Texas audiences and beyond via colorful stories of his "creative childhood" and assorted stories from his own family.

Seems the biggest state in the continental United States wasn't big enough. Two years ago Williams headed for the bright lights of the big time, moving to New York City. Evidently the move was a smart one. Since heading north, he and his one-man cast of characters have performed at the prestigious *Caroline's Comedy Club* and *Don't Tell Mama* cabaret.

Prior to returning to the Lone Star State, Williams talked to *The Texas Triangle* about his namesake, leaving the *Less Miserable* nest and the future of gay comedy.

TEXAS TRIANGLE: First of all, I want to tell you (with mock adoration) I just loved your work in *Smokey and the Bandit*, parts one and two ...

PAUL J. WILLIAMS (groaning and laughing): Oh, oh, the only thing worse you could have said was "I loved you in 'Phantom of the Paradise'!"

TT: I'm sorry, I just had to do that.

PJW: It's so funny that you did, because the opening monologue of my show is one that I wrote last year about going through life with the name "Paul Williams" and why I put the "J" in.

TT: I was always a big fan of his, probably because I immediately recognized him as a lesbian, even before I knew that I was, myself. So how's everything? Are you looking forward to coming back to Texas?

PJW: Oh, I'm just regretting every moment of it (laughing wildly) Actually, I am. This [month] marks two years since I moved, and I haven't gone back to my home base to do my show. Having been at Esther's Follies a couple of times, and at the Pocket Sandwich Theatre on numerous occasions. I thought, "You know what? It's time to go back."

TT: What's the biggest difference between a show in Dallas and a show in

New York?

PJW: Smaller audiences in New York. In New York, you've got people who have seen it all. And although it's not really this bad, your fear and your apprehension is you're going to have an audience that's going to sit there with their arms folded, going, "Make me laugh!"

TT: "I dare you to make me laugh!"

PJW: Yeah, because "We've seen it." Being that I'm not a known commodity here [in New York] like I was in Texas, it's very humbling to go from being "a big fish in a small pond" to "Who the fuck are you?"

TT: When did you first start doing comedy?

PJW: I started out with a three-man comedy troupe in 1988 called, *Less Miserable*. We were asked to put that together on a dare, not thinking anything would ever come of it. But a) we were having fun with it, and b) we were developing this phenomenal following that we stayed together for six years. At the end of that six years had been to the Rose Tattoo in Hollywood, we played *The Duplex* in New York, we played *Provincetown* for two summers.

It was while we were in Provincetown, I guess the summer of '93, that we were sharing a house with Suzanne Westenhoefer. Suzanne that spent an afternoon with me one afternoon, and she just said "You know what? Y'all are great and everything, but you need to go out on your own, and I want to help you."

I looked at her and I remember saying, "I can't. I've got to have the safety of two other people on-stage. Besides, I don't have anything to talk about." We were walking, and we stopped, and she grabbed me by the shoulders and she said, "Paul! You're gay, you're from Texas, you're Southern Baptist! Start writing!"

TT: So, Suzanne was — without marriage — the Yoko Ono who broke up the Beatles that was *Less Miserable*?

PJW: Yes. She was the Berry Gordy that pulled Diana Ross out. I always get Kate Clinton's goat too. Suzanne used to tease me, she said, "You know, Kate Clinton is the woman who got me into comedy. And I am the woman who got you into comedy. So, in essence, that makes Kate your comedy grandmother." It's true — we are a direct lineage.

TT: I see the resemblance. Has it

always been "out" comedy?

PJW: Always. *Less Miserable* was nebulous. We were together before it was really cool and hip to be out, so we always tried to walk a fine line because we did have mixed crowd who came to see us. And we were proud of that.

But once I went out on my own ... sometimes I feel like I was six months late getting into it because just as I was starting was when it really hit — the whole gay and lesbian comedy thing. Ed Korbvaski came out with his book, *A Funny Time to be Gay*, and all these TV specials were coming out. And I wasn't well-known enough at the time to get in on any of that. I missed the hype, if you will, which has always frustrated me.

TT: If that was the "hype," where do

that I've got an appeal to straight audiences. and I can play to straight audiences? They don't want to take the risk.

TT: Still?

PJW: Still.

TT: How has your material changed since you first started, and how have the audiences changed?

PJW: The material has changed in the sense that I have gotten a lot more comfortable with myself on-stage. I look back at my early demo tapes, and at that point I was really pushing the gay thing not so much in my material, but in my look. You know, the freedom rings, the brightly colored vests. In fact, my closing line in my show was always about how important it was to come out to people; "If you have trouble saying the words 'I'm gay,' start dressing like I do and remove all doubt."

TT: That's still a laughable line.

PJW: Well, yeah, but I don't have that "look" so much on-stage anymore. [But] five years later, have some choice jokes that I still love doing because they're unique to me. I think the material has changed in that I'm trying not to be — How do I say this? — as "Nelly" on-stage as I used to be. And just to kind of be a little smarter. Actually, the audiences have changed because I have changed geographically. I'm still doing mostly gay and lesbian gigs though. And I'm pretty OK with that, because I think there's always going to be gays and lesbians who need someone on their team, helping them to laugh and not being the butt of the jokes.

TT: Anything to add?

PJW: I encourage readers to support gay and lesbian comics, whoever they are. We are unique within our community in our abilities to find our own foibles and make us laugh at each other in a good way. I think it's important in our community that we support our own.

*Paul J. Williams, San Antonio's funniest gay son, tours Texas with **Left, Out, And Not Right**, a "genteel" comedy celebration dealing with the ironies of living gay in Texas.*

AUSTIN: Saturday, August 21, 9 p.m. in the Velvet Room at Esther's Follies, 525 E. 6th St. Tickets: \$10. Info: 512-320-0553.

DALLAS: Monday, August 23, 7:30 p.m. at Pocket Sandwich Theatre. Tickets: \$10. Info: 214-821-1860.

SAN ANTONIO: Thursday, August 26, Rivercenter Comedy Club, Rivercenter Mall, San Antonio. Reception at 8 a.m., followed by performance at 8:30 p.m. Benefits San Antonio Gay and Lesbian Community Center. With Vickie Shaw; other acts to be announced. Tickets available at Half Price Books, Records, Magazines, Textures — A Women's Bookstore in "The Yard" on Main; and at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, 3126 N. St. Mary's. Info: Rivercenter Comedy Club box office, 210-229-1111; 210-732-4300.

you see gay comedy now, as we approach the 21st century?

PJW: That's a good question. Quite honestly, I think it's on it's way out. Suzanne was famines for having said that along. She said, "You know, it's great that we can do this, but if we don't maintain some momentum with mainstream comedy clubs and diversifying our audiences, then when this fad is over — and it is a fad — we'll have nothing to do." And my experience with comedy clubs in New York, of all places, has been that the gay clubs are the only ones that are on "out" gay night." And that's not a good thing.

A Queer Clown in the Family

Gay comic Paul J. Williams was born to make 'em laugh

By Allen Kalchik, Editor

"I'm lucky that I come from a family with a great sense of humor," comedian Paul J. Williams says of finding his way to a career in standup comedy.

Take, for example, his maternal grandfather: "He was one of these Bohemians that did a little bit of everything throughout his life, and at one point he was actually a clown. He used to be a Santa Claus at the malls, and he had this insane sense of humor."

Williams, born and raised in San Antonio and now living in New York City, is on a cell phone from a Tex-Mex Manhattan eatery with a margarita in his hand, talking about his Southern Baptist background and his upcoming show in Phoenix.

The out-and-proud funnyman will be on the bill with The Derivative Duo on Feb. 19 for a benefit show at Phoenix College. He has appeared in the Valley several times before and says he is looking forward to returning.

But back to the family: "My father—if you used to watch the Dean Martin Roasts back in the '70s on TV, one of the roasters was always Foster Brooks—and my father does a dead-on impression of Foster Brooks. So laughter was always a big part of my family."

Is it any surprise to his parents, then, that their gay boy eventually chose the life of a comedian? "Heeeaaavans, no!" he drawls. "In fact, both my parents have commented on how much I'm like my grandfather. It's almost scary—he died when I was like, 13, but it's almost like his man is reliving his life through me."

Unlike many stand-up comics with class-clown antics in their childhoods, Williams says he wasn't a cut-up as a kid in school. "I was very much of a nerd, scrawny and picked on. I was The Fag, if you will."

By high school, however, things had changed. Williams had a best friend with whom he'd grown up and sung in church choir. "We were kind of like the Hawkeye and Honeycutt of our church group" he recalls. "He had a way of having a comeback for everybody. He was a basketball star, and was not gay or picked on. But he taught me at an early age how to fight back with words and to always have a comeback for everything."

Lesson learned. By the time Williams reached eighth grade he had become "this little performer."

He explains, "I appeared in the seventh grade talent show doing Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann character—in full drag." From Edith Ann, Williams progressed to copying Tomlin's snooty telephone operator, Ernestine.

"When I got to high school, I did the Edith Ann skit again and the high school drama department built me this huge rocking chair."

The performing bug had definitely bitten, but Williams didn't go into comedy full time until after he had graduated college and tried life in "the real world" for a few years.

In 1988, he and two friends formed a cabaret-style comedy group called "Less Miserable". They toured widely and to critical acclaim for six years. Then Williams split to try his hand at solo

queer standup in 1994.

It was pretty good timing for Williams to get bookings as an out gay comic. "If you look at comedy in the '70s, it was the African American comic. In the '80s, it was the woman comic. And in the '90s it was the gay comic. And who knows what it's going to be in the 2000's?"

Tomlin's influence remains a part of Williams' act in that he has created a character of his own to portray: Nelda Pickens, a bee-hived, chain-smoking, white trash real estate agent. He also cites Jonathan Winters as an inspiration, and uses his own childhood in South Texas and upbringing as a gay Baptist as the source for much of his humor.

Williams moved to New York to



branch beyond standup, and has performed there in a one-man show he wrote himself called, *Left, Out, ... and Not Right!*. He questions now whether the proliferation of gay standup in the last decade was a only passing fancy. "If it is a fad, the question is: are we able to maintain an audience once the fad slips, and still work? And I really think the fad is starting to slip."

He notes a post-*Ellen* lack of interest in gay standup material on the part of club promoters and managers—particularly in New York, he says, where gay comics are considered not trendy. "It's like, 'oh we'll

put you on our gay night.' Well—that's hauling water to the stream, people."

In the larger picture, meanwhile, comedy clubs have been closing "left and right," he says, "especially in the last five years."

It may be that sitcom stardom has replaced the club-tour gig as an upcoming comic's most desirable goal, or it may be because an explosion of cable programming has made watching standup so accessible that potential club patrons can now channel surf for bellylaughs without ever leaving the house.

Williams likes the former explanation as for why comics don't tour the club circuit by station wagon the way they used to. "It's because we've gotten spoiled and

we don't want to do that. I remember seeing Rosie O'Donnell on a show talking about her early days—how every club you play in, you stay in some horrible condo. Hello?! I've done that—and it's just not fun."

Which is why, Williams says, he prefers to play almost exclusively at gay and lesbian events like the one in Phoenix on the 19th. "They treat you better, you make more money, and you have more fun."

Williams played a benefit in Phoenix in '95 with three other comics and appeared at a local

bar in the early '90s when he was still with *Less Miserable*. "So I have a little bit of a history with Phoenix."

Does he like it here? "Loooooove it!" he says eagerly, the margarita and his southern charm kicking in at, apparently, exactly the same time.

"I'm like the proverbial senior citizen. I want to go back to Scottsdale!"



Paul J. Williams will perform with singing comedians The Derivative Duo at Phoenix College on Feb. 19, at 7:00 p.m. Call 602/265-7283 for tickets and information.

Paul J. Williams: the 'J' stands for jokes

by David Crosson

In his own words he's "a Jerry Springer show just waiting to happen." The grandson of a professional clown, Paul J. Williams was born in the rough and tumble state of Texas and raised Southern Baptist. After deciding that his marketing degree from Baylor University wasn't taking him where he wanted to go, Williams branched out into comedy, to offer his especially humorous take on the human condition to the rest of the world (with a background like his, it was only a matter of time...).

In an exclusive interview, *Outlooks* caught up with Williams in anticipation of the first annual Tickled Pink comedy night, Friday June 16 at Martha Cohen Theatre, where he will share the stage with (now) fellow New Yorker Michele Balan.

Outlooks: Growing up in Texas, you were, by your own admission, a bit of an outsider—was humour something you used to negotiate your way out of bullying situations?

Williams: It didn't start out that way. I was really good friends with a guy who I'm still friends with today—even though he's a good ol' straight boy—and in high school we were kind of like Hawkeye and Pierce, you know, from MASH? He's the one that taught me that. I was always a wimp, somewhat of a fag, and not someone who would ever fight physically, and he taught me early on not to let people bully me. Come back with something. So I learned to use the tongue, if you will, as my weapon. And I think most burgeoning gay kids do—at least gay male kids—it becomes our "witty repartee" [Laughs]. I was really pretty much introverted until sometime in high school when I really kind of 'blossomed'.

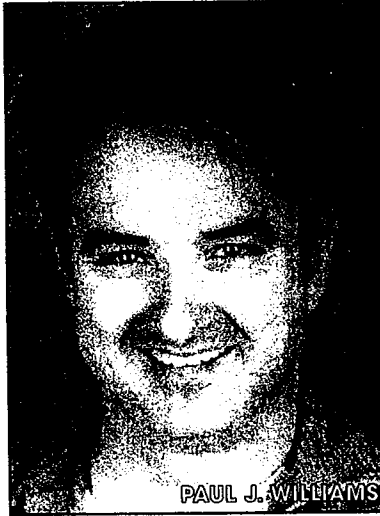
Outlooks: What a wonderful bit of career training early on in your life.

Williams: Hello! When I finally made the decision to do this, my family and friends were all like "Oh, thank God, you're going to get paid for being yourself!"

Outlooks: Has your move to New York provided you with an even greater resource for material?

Williams: You'd think... but in reality the new stuff I've been writing has nothing to do with the fact that I live in New York. I guess I kind of take this for granted. I think, either a: what's funny about it? or b: whatever is funny about it has already been said by other comics and now it's stale material. I do a couple of things about funny experiences I've had there, but those are few and far between.

Outlooks: How often do you go home to Texas? Is that a way to keep in touch and source new material?



Williams: I talk to my parents almost every day, which is kind of odd, I realize. I don't get home that much but my family is very close and we speak often. And when I do get back to Texas I go back to Dallas, which is where I lived before I moved here. I lived there longer than I lived in San Antonio where I grew up, so I kind of feel like Dallas is really 'home'. I get back about once every three or four months.

Outlooks: You're pretty much a gay-boy from the word "go" in your act; was that a conscious decision or was your sense of humour so rooted in 'gay' that there was no point in trying to hide the fact?

Williams: Oh no—that was a conscious decision. I got started being a comic by one of the most well-known lesbian comics there are, and that was Suzanne Westenhoefer. I was part of a three-man comedy troupe called Less Miserable that was together from '88 to '94. We were performing in Provincetown in the summer of '93 and we were sharing a house with Suzanne. And it was Suzanne who pulled me aside one afternoon and said "It's so obvious that you are the strong point of this group, you need to go out on your own." This was when gay comedy was really starting to get big and I thought: I will have no part of that—I have to be onstage with two other people, I'm too scared to do it by myself. And I said "What the heck do I have to say?" and Suzanne looked at me and said "Please! You're gay, you're from Texas and you're *had*—now start writing!"

Outlooks: Good career advice from someone with a good career.

Williams: So it was a very conscious decision to be gay—openly gay. Now the question from here is how gay am I? And that has to do with who I'm performing

for. I do have an appeal to straight audiences, as I've proven here in New York, and I will tone back a lot of the gay stuff, not out of a sense of embarrassment at all but a sense of "They're not going to get it." And if they're not being entertained then why am I on stage? I have yet to do a set anywhere where it did not come up at some point that I'm gay. I just don't think that's possible for me to do: it's not being true; it's not being real.

Outlooks: I spoke to Michele Balan last month and she said the same thing: comedy's about truth.

Williams: From the business standpoint of it you think: if there's someone from Letterman in the audience tonight I better be just as straight as I can be. But then I realize: you know what—f*** that. I may never be on Leno or Letterman or whatever because the powers that be have a hang-up about me appealing to people in Topeka, Kansas. But, you know what? That's fine with me; there are always going to be gay and lesbian venues that need a comic that's not going to be making jokes at their expense. And it may be limiting me but I'm just not going to play the game.

Outlooks: Well, being true to yourself and being comfortable with what is truly your material, doesn't that give you greater strength as a performer?

Williams: Well, yeah, I guess it does. There are times when I'd like to get up and have something to say that is funny and universal. Not gay or straight, just universal. I have not found that voice yet. I admire gay and lesbian comics who have found that voice and I'm starting to learn it, but too much of what I find humorous affects me or how I live or how my friends live as gay or lesbian people.

Outlooks: You do a bit of audience participation in your act; does that unpredictability give you a real thrill when you're onstage?

Williams: Oh, yeah! If you look at

most comics in comedy clubs—not on television, in comedy clubs—most of their act is based on what people in the audience say. As Paul J. Williams I have never felt comfortable doing that. But as a character, let it rip! I don't know why the wall is there but I've been experimenting a bit more with what I do in my own part of the set. And when I'm doing Nelda... you just try and stop me!

Outlooks: You were raised Southern Baptist, are they really as scary as we think they are?

Williams: There are elements [Pauses.] It's one of the things my father and I have discussed and I promised him that I would always try to temper my joke: about the Southern Baptists with a comment or a statement that there are good Southern Baptist people out there. My parents are a prime example of that—they're like a walking PFLAG chapter but they're still very involved and they believe what they believe. There is an element within the Southern Baptist church, much as there is an element in the gay and lesbian community, that is radical

And those that are radical are just crazy—my brother being one of them. You just agree not to bring certain things up, because there is no reasoning. The Bible said it, I believe it, that's it—there is no question of interpreting. So, yes, unfortunately, there are those individuals but I do want to make people understand that I don't want all Southern Baptists painted as idiots just as I don't want all gay and lesbian people to be painted as perverts.

Outlooks: Mind if I do a little word association?

Williams: Oh, no, I love these!

Outlooks: Fred Phelps.

Williams: Idiot.

Outlooks: Pride.

Williams: Colours.

Outlooks: Breakfast.

Williams: Skipped.

Outlooks: Funny.

Williams: Humorous.

Outlooks: Success.

Williams: Money.

Outlooks: Clinton.

Williams: Oooh.

Outlooks: Did you say oooh or eeew? Is 'eeew' your answer?

Williams: [Laughs.] No! Um... respect.

Outlooks: Love.

Williams: Wish.

Outlooks: Pornography.

Williams: Disinterest.

Outlooks: Paul J. Williams.

Williams: Hilarious.

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FOXWOOD
BED & BREAKFAST

Texans

By Thomas Rockman Jr.
TRIANGLE Staff

Dallas stand-up comic and former Less Miserable trouper Paul J. Williams was not satisfied to be just an ordinary kid growing up in 1970's San Antonio.

While his classmates wore jeans and carried their books to school, Williams referred to slip on slacks and tote his books in a satchel.

"I was very fashionable and trendy," said Williams, who brings his one-man THE BEST LITTLE HOMO IN TEXAS show to Austin April 4. "One day, my mom took my brother and I to school, dropped us off, and as I grabbed my books, I said to her, 'Chia!'"

"My brother replied, 'Where did you get that from?'" Williams recalled.

Born the third son of a conservative Southern Baptist family, Williams said that he was a "social butterfly" since age 6.

Adept at social skills [he befriended a whole campground of pers during a summer Arkansas vacation with his family], he said he suffered from a serious case of stage fright during an 8th-grade speech class.

"I remember being terribly frightened," he said. "I started doing talent shows at Nimitz Middle School. I loved doing Lily Tomlin's character Edith Ann in full drag because I got laughs and I got attention."

"I also decided to do Ernestine because Lily Tomlin is my idol. I think that's what got me hooked."

By the time that parents Elwin, 69, and Irene Williams, 69, reared his two older sons Bruce and Jerry, Paul J.'s parents gave the budding comedian more leeway in his weaning. "I was the baby of the family, so I was spoiled," said the 35 year old. "I was raised like an only child."

Ironically, Paul J. Williams derives much of his comedy material from the Baptist faith, even though he considers his hometown Trinity Baptist church to be the exception to the rule. Trinity has been progressive on gay and lesbian issues, Williams said.

"My parents began to grow when they realized and questioned some of their beliefs," he said. "They'd always been taught one way, but who says that one way is right or wrong?"

In his one-man act, Williams said his sense of sarcasm is based in truth. Some people may consider his taking on the church as "Baptist bashing," but he said that the Baptist church has been bashing gays and lesbians for years including when it boycotted Disney summer '96.

"I'm not saying 'an eye for an eye' is right," he said. "What I'm sarcastic about is the true things that the Baptist church has said and done, and continues to do."

The person who had the largest influence on Williams' life was his grandfather Carl Head. Williams describes his grandfather as a "creative Bohemian" who made and sold little trinkets to people along the parade route during the annual Fiesta celebration.

Intuitively, Williams said he knows that his grandfather was gay, but that Head could not come out as a gay man because of the era in which he lived.

"I feel a special bond with him even though he's been dead since 1974," he said. "I thoroughly believe that he's relieving his life through me."

"The memories I have of him are very



much like mine. It's kinda scary."

After graduating in '83 from Baylor University with a marketing degree, he moved to Fort Worth and managed the Sanger Harris men's clothing store.

"I was Mr. Humphreys in 'Are You Being Served?,' a typical fag job," Williams said. Moving to Dallas in '85, he tried his luck as a singing waiter at Caruso's Italian restaurant and he also ran around singing telegrams.

His big break came in 1988 after starring in the musical production "1776." According to Williams, the play's director asked fellow actors Pat Skinner and Steven Crabtree to join Williams in a gay comedy troupe.

"Steven and I reached a point where we could read each other's minds," said Williams, who retained his infamous characters Nelda Pickens and Sister Helen Holy for his solo routine. "I honed my comedy sense by practicing it for six years."

In 1994, Less Miserable parted paths because of what Williams called "burn out" and disagreement over the group's direction. Crabtree joined Esther's Follies in Austin, and Williams won over local audiences with his solo comedy career.

"The uncanny thing about Less Miserable was for all the incredible tim-

ing we had on stage, there was nothing [there] once we left the stage," he said.

Williams encourages gays and lesbians to bring their straight friends to his April 4-5, and April 11-12, 8 p.m. performances of THE BEST LITTLE HOMO IN TEXAS at The Velveta Room at Esther's Follies in Austin.

Besides Lily Tomlin, Williams said that he admires Rosie O'Donnell's use of pop icons, such as the Partridge family. Robin Williams' improvisational skills and Susanne Westenhofer's willingness to be an out lesbian comic.

"Susanne has the ability to walk a line between gay and straight," he said. "The way she incorporates her relationship with her lover parallels so many straight relationships."

In July '97, Williams said that he plans to move to New York so that he can pursue a comedy career more vigorously. Appropriately, he will be living in Queens, he said.

"In a way, it's quite frightening to leave Dallas where everyone knows you," he said. "I'll make sure people in New York know who I am."

Esther's Follies is located at 521 East Sixth Street in Austin. Tickets are \$10, and reservations are required by calling (512) 320-0553.

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A Small Fish In A Big Pond

PAUL J. WILLIAMS

by Bob Myers

Paul J. Williams (yes, the J is important) once considered himself a big fish in a small pond. This funny, openly gay comedian had outgrown his Texas confines, and had to stretch his wings (gills?), all the way to the Big Apple—New York City—where he could hone his craft, and pursue a comedy career more vigorously.

Out Front Colorado readers first had the chance to meet Williams as he embarked on this major career decision two years ago. Coloradans will once again have the chance to laugh with the new and improved comedian at a return engagement on April 17th for Comedy Gay-La V, at the Denver Auditorium Theatre.

Those that have not seen his act will for the first time experience a character unlike any other. Nelda Pickens, a bee-hived, white trash, gravelly voiced, chain smoking real estate agent, makes a return appearance. The Aunt that won't die. That character flies everyone knows her, Williams responds to what we might expect. For those that have seen Williams perform, in addition to new material drawing from being gay and single in NY, "will experience a performer who now feels a lot more comfortable with my material."

New or old, Nelda as a character typifies Williams, as a gay man, and a performer. "The first comedy album I owned was by Lily Tomlin. It is kind of pathetic I have every word memorized. As a kid, (whether) dressing up as Edith Ann in 7th grade, or imitating Ernestine in 8th, it was easy to hide behind a character," Williams admits. "Obviously I'm not fitting in as Paul maybe I can make you laugh some other way," he adds.

When venturing into exclusively gay material, Williams has found the waters a little more intimidating, even in New York, where he now believes himself a small fish in a big pond. He explains. "It is difficult (in New York), very competitive. Many mainstream club owners are afraid if they welcome an openly gay comic(s), (that it) will turn into a gay club. Then there are the jokes themselves. Humor can be found in so many different ways. How I deal with the world as a gay person. You want material where the audience feels in on a joke, not the butt of one."

"I thought I would have to get rid of my Southern material, but really, it is a whole other area for New Yorkers," says Williams. It has thrown a little blockage in their paths when discussing Baptists, there being so many Jewish jokes, that, and the identification of Baptists being associated with the African American community here (in the South). Once past that, (they're fine)"

Williams likens what he does to taking baby steps, "when confronted with straight, as well as a gay audience. Such as the state of the inclusion of gays and lesbians represented on television. I adore Will and Grace. Pooh on you to the people that think Jack's character is too gay. They bait both sides of the wind, Will being the other," says Williams. Who would he play, if he had his choice? "Jack, without a doubt, mainly because I want to make people laugh."

The Ellen show, on the other hand, perhaps took too large of steps, according to Williams. "I agree with Chastity Bono's comment, that it was too gay. If we truly are 10 percent of the population, then perhaps (the viewer) is not relating to this," he concludes.

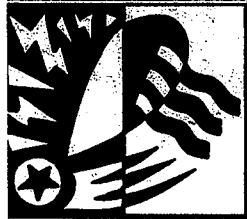
On his search to find a happy medium for his comedy, Williams finds himself quite popular with the bear community, for reasons he is unsure. "Why a skinny, pasty, dark-haired kid?" He asks, although adding bears are one of the least pretentious groups he has dealt with. "I have fun with them and am comfortable with them."

Realistic about his aspirations, now that he has had a taste of the big city, Williams has begun to diversify his talent. Commercial voice-overs, musicals, auditions in general are all things on his plate, as he searches for ways to make ends meet, and do the one thing that means the most to him. "I love making people laugh. I do believe God has given me a gift. (It's just) finding other ways to harness it," Williams says, thoughtfully. A small fish gets bigger, given the right circumstances. ■

Check out Paul J. Williams, along with Georgia Ragsdale and Michele Balan (and *Out Front Colorado!*) on Saturday, April 17th at the Denver Auditorium for Comedy Gay-La V, and have fun supporting and laughing with them. Tickets are available at Category 6 Books, The Book Garden, Word is Out (Boulder), and all TicketMaster outlets. To order by phone: (303) 830-8497 or (719) 520-9090. Cost is \$19 (plus service charges).



Calendar

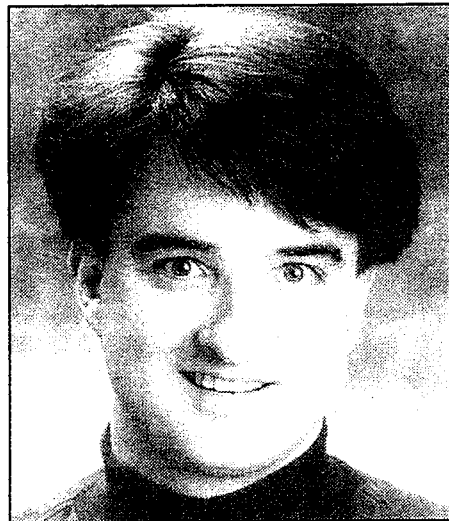


Events

for the week

Just As I Am: Confessions of a Creative Child:

The Dallas performance scene loses another talent as former Less Miserable leader Paul J. Williams heads to New York City to seek his fortunes. His cabaret performances have already been praised there, so before Williams is hosting "Talk Soup!" or hobnobbing with Lily on Broadway, check out his swan song performance "Just As I Am: Confessions of a Creative Child." Williams grew up a gay Southern Baptist Texan and has not only survived the combination, but gained hilarious wisdom from it. If you thought all gay men were born in major urban areas with the ability to style hair, mix martinis, and dis closed minds, check out Williams' monologues about being "creative" in small-town South Texas.



Paul J. Williams takes a bow May 16-24.

unique

JULY 1996

People

The funny faces of Paul J. Williams

by yvonne bertucci



As we were arranging a time and a place for our meeting, he began describing himself, so I would be able to pick him out at the restaurant. "Salt and pepper hair, more on the salt side, caesar, gay haircut #4," he explained. I said, "I might be wearing mine slicked back depending on the weather." His remark, "Oh, dyke hairdo #2."

We finally decided to meet at the local diner. I was surprised to see him sitting outside, considering he was birching about the heat and humidity Miami Beach is famous for. A balmy day it was, to say the least. The ceiling fans were spinning quickly, cutting through the dense air. As for me, it was perfect since I wanted to smoke cigarettes. We were sipping our iced teas, like two gossiping school girls. He describes how his own life experiences are the best material for his stand-up routine. "I'm from Texas, I'm a Southern Baptist, I'm gay and I'm still alive," comedian Paul J. Williams says when he gets on stage.

"Sometimes I'm ashamed to say I'm a Southern Baptist, but I get the best lines - you know, kind of like a verbal trinity. For example, 'oh, your son's a homosexual and is going to hell, *bless your heart*.'...I try to find the humor in what happened to me when I was a kid, even if it was painful," he explained.

Paul reminisced on his early days, remembering when he did Lily Tomlin's "Edith Anne" in full drag. His drama teacher begged his parents to let him join the theatre program, but Paul's dad wouldn't have any part of it. "I was the triple crowned queen you might say -

I'm from Texas, I'm a Southern Baptist, I'm gay and I'm still alive!?

that included drama, choir and band." But as Paul got older, and decided to attend university, he figured he'd make daddy happy and get a business degree. "So I did what every good fag does and that's go into retail. It was fun for a while, but I kept thinking that I wanted to do what really made me happy, and that was being in front of people," Paul said.

In 1988, Paul began to perform with a troupe of three men who called themselves the Less Miserables. They worked together for nearly six years and started to grow apart. Two years ago, Paul branched off on his own. Being the promoter and publicist for the Less Miserables, he managed to keep his connections and learned how to promote himself. Since then, he has hired a manager. Paul claims he couldn't have gotten this far if it wasn't for Suzanne Westenhoefer, his mentor. "She's been telling me for years, 'go out on your own', and she finally helped me do it."

Paul might be relocating to New York City or Los Angeles. "I really don't want to leave Dallas,

but if it's going to happen for me, I need to be in a place where I can meet the right people. If it's going to happen for me, I need to be where it's at," he explained. Leaning towards Los Angeles, Paul still has to keep his day job until things start to pick up. "I do books for a interior designer. I told him that I need a flexible schedule because I'm a performer. He said to me that he knows I'll be famous one day and he just wants to be able to say that I worked for him," he said, laughing.

Gearing up for a week in Oklahoma has stirred a strange excitement inside of Paul. "I'll be doing straight clubs in Lawton, Oklahoma. I'll probably have to take 'don't ask don't tell' to new heights. I've really got to be selective with what I'm going to say, I mean, I can't hide the fact that I'm gay, but we'll see how it goes. I'm going to be performing for people that live in a town where all they have is a military base. This should be interesting."

The thing most people feel about Paul is that he's a "safe" gay comic. His routine is not all about sex - it's more lifestyle oriented. "I mean, gays and lesbians have been the butt of jokes for years. Now, we need to learn to laugh at it. Comedy is resurging because more gays and lesbians are going to comedy clubs. And for those of you that don't support the gay and lesbian comics, for God's sake start!" A devout Southern Baptist using God's name in vain? Paul, you faggot you! *Bless your heart.* ▼

BY BRUCE WILLIAMS



PAUL WILLIAMS

Dallas Comedian Proud to Call Himself

"The Best Little Homo in Texas"

Being gay in the '90s would seem to be a pretty serious matter, what with the dangers of AIDS, hate crimes and the Radical Right. But Dallas comedian Paul Williams has an uncanny talent for finding the humor and outrageousness in everyday life and making his audiences laugh about it—and through the laughter come the building blocks to understanding, tolerance and love.

"Is the audience laughing at me or with me?" Williams mused prior to his one-hour show at the Velveeta Room last Saturday in Austin. "It's a fine line. I'm told by some people that I'm a 'safe' gay comedian, in that I'm not doing anything overly sexual, in-your-face, uncomfortable. At a few points in my show, I want them laughing at me, because that's what I am. The main part of my show is the realization that everybody in Texas knew somebody like me."

The success of Williams' comedy is evident in the enthusiastic crowds he's attracted; his run started March 31, and he's proven so popular that his show has been held over two weeks. It concludes at 9:30 p.m. today (Friday) and Saturday, and then he's off to Kansas City, Oklahoma City and wherever else the message of laughter and tolerance needs to be spread.

Williams started out in show business as part of the three-man comedy group

Less Miserables. He went solo nearly a year ago when the group broke up; his first gig was at the Stonewall during the Gay Games in New York City. Gay and lesbian comedy is the "in" thing right now, and Williams has the confidence and talent—and honesty—to both survive and thrive in the serious business of being funny.

"All the jokes may be different, but it comes from similar things: the experience of being gay," he explained. "One reason gay comedy is...so successful is that, as far as straight comedy [is concerned], every topic there has been done to death."

Does he believe "gay" comedy is a phase?

"From a business sense, I think we all do. It's going to pass; a big question in each professional's mind is, when it does, will we still be hot, will we still have what it takes to make it? In the '70s it was African-American comedians; then women comics were the phase. But I'm definitely enjoying it while I can!"

At the Velveeta Room, Williams is doing a one-hour monologue featuring characters such as Sister Helen the Baptist Firebrand, Stewart the Braniff steward and Williams' favorite, Nelda the real estate broker. He especially enjoys and thrives on improvising as his characters make the audience part of the show.

"That's my favorite part; I really get off

on working without a net!" the 33-year-old Baylor grad laughs. "I really like Helen, but there's a lot of comparison to Dana Carvey, and that's unavoidable; I try not to do any of his (Church Lady) stuff. Nelda's my favorite; I can almost get schizophrenic with Nelda with a crowd that knows me."



Williams finds humor in anything and everything, from '60s television and cartoon characters (he teases straight members of his audiences that they must feel like Lily on *The Munsters*) to "Lesbyterians" (he's leery of them when they "get the gift of tongues") to places like Oklahoma ("the state slogan is 'Oklahoma is OK' because they couldn't spell 'mediocre'). Growing up in a Southern Baptist family in San Antonio provided him rich material to work with, and he mines his personal experiences frequently and cleverly. His best target is his fundamentalist, stick-in-the-mud brother Bruce (no relation to this writer).

"My strict parents are possibly going to drive up from San Antonio to see me today; they haven't seen my solo act yet," Williams said. "They're very supportive and excited about what I've chosen to do. I'm very lucky, considering so many friends I know have been cut off from their families."

Besides his weekend work as a comedian, Williams has day jobs with the Turtle Creek Chorale and an interior design showroom in Dallas. He also emcees karaoke on Sundays at JR's nightclub in Dallas. But it's being onstage in the spotlight that he loves, and he hopes to do more and more of it. He auditioned for "Out There III," a gay and lesbian Comedy Central special, in Los Angeles; he makes his first international outing June 1 in Toronto, and he's also booked for the Bering Community Service Foundation's Tropicana Benefit at the Lovett Inn in Houston on May 7.

"We're working really hard to make everybody laugh," Williams said of gay comics in general, and himself in particular. "My goal is to reach straight people as well as gay, to show the humanity in everyone. My heroes were Lily Tomlin, Robin Williams and Jonathan Winters; when I was 12, I was doing Edith Ann in talent shows—in full drag! I just hope the gay and lesbian community will support any gay and lesbian comedian that comes around; we're trying to make people laugh, and maybe make straights think and accept others a little more."

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Vol. 3 ▾ No. 25

The State's Gay News Source

April 6, 1995

Williams, The best little homo in Texas

By Brad Williams
TRIANGLE Staff

AUSTIN — Dallas comic Paul Williams delighted audiences over the March on Austin weekend with his one-man show, "The Best Little Homo In Texas," and will be extending his run for the next two weekends (April 8-9 and April 15-16) at the Velvet Room on Sixth Street. Williams, formerly of the popular Dallas comedy troupe Less Miserable, launched his solo career last summer with an engagement at the Duplex in New York during the Stonewall 25/Gay Games events. His material is campy, yet fresh, and includes monologues about growing up gay in Texas, as well as several hilarious character sketches.

The funniest moments of the show come with his trademark character from Less Miserable — a chain-smoking, big-haired, white trash real estate agent from Pflugerville (or Balch Springs if you see the show in Dallas). He also does a character almost identical to Dana Carvey's Church Lady, which he performed at society parties in Dallas in the mid-eighties. Williams, 33, was born in Monroe, Louisiana, but moved to Texas with his family at the age of two. Growing up in San Antonio, he was "a triple crown queen" in high school — involved in band, choir and drama.

"Growing up in the Southern Baptist Church, everyone referred to me as 'Brother and Sister Williams' creative child," he told the Triangle in a recent interview. "He's so creative." That's the Baptist way of saying, "He's a big fag."

While attending Baylor, Williams sang with the famed Baylor Religious Hour Choir, and also belonged to a fraternity, which he was asked to leave when he came out during his Junior year. After college, he moved to the Dallas/Fort Worth area, where he worked at Sanger Harris ("What good homosexual hasn't worked in retail?" he says). He lost his job when Sanger folded.

"I thought, 'If I'm going to be unemployed, I'm going to be happy and unemployed,'" he said. "I had always wanted to do some sort of performing. I had majored in business to please my father, but now I thought, 'It's time to do something for me.'"

He got his start doing singing telegrams ("It was a blessing; it really taught me how to perform."), and then progressed to local theater. In May of '88, he and his pianist friend Pat Skinner met Steven Crabtree, another Dallas comic, and the three were encouraged by the artistic director of the Dallas Alliance Theatre to form a cabaret act.

"Steven came up with the name 'Less Miserable' because Les Mis was really big at that time," Williams said. "We thought, 'We won't do this more than a few months.' We had five people there the first night, but it snowballed and suddenly we were packing the big cabaret in Dallas, and before we knew it, we were playing L.A. and New York and Provincetown."

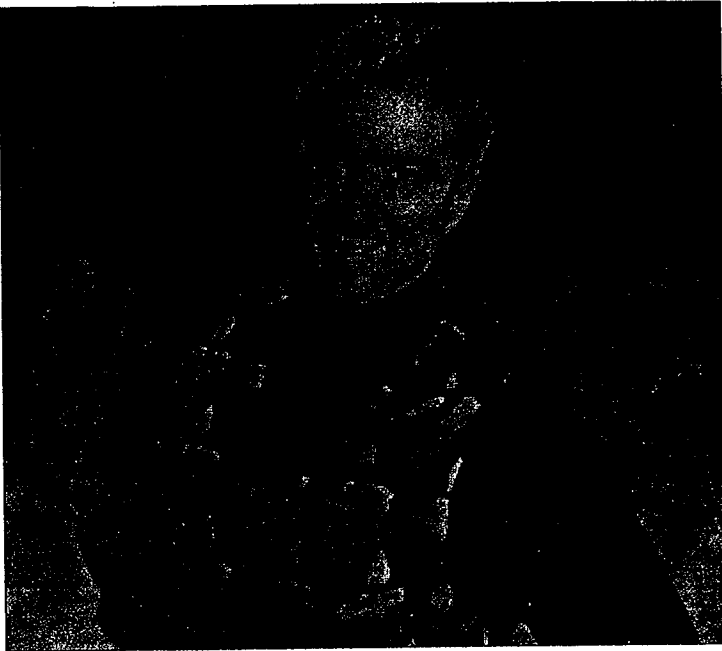
After six years together, Less Miserable performed its final show in December.

"We all had our own opinions about going forward with the group," Williams said. "I felt it was time to move on, or at least to take a break from the group."

Crabtree moved to Austin to join the legendary comedy troupe Esther's Follies ("I'm so happy for him," said Williams) and Skinner is currently teaching at an acting school in Dallas. Williams says he was "terrified" about going solo: "I had always had the safety of two other people on stage with me; and it was sketch comedy — I'd never gotten up and just talked." It was the encouragement and advice of his mentor, lesbian comic Suzanne Westenhoeffer, that helped him create his one-man show: "She said, 'Paul, you're from the South, you grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist home, and you're gay. There's your material.'"

Williams recently auditioned in L.A. for the next "Out There" special on Comedy Central, but hasn't heard anything yet ("If I don't get it, it's because I haven't been around long enough; there are so many gay and lesbian comics out there who have been struggling for years.").

With his comedy career looking to blossom further, Williams is reluctantly thinking about leaving Dallas, where he holds down a variety of jobs, such as serving as Advertising Sales Director for the Turtle Creek Chorale, doing bookkeeping for an interior design showroom, performing at private parties, and emceeing kareoke at J.R.s. He can't decide between New York and L.A., but wherever he ends up, he intends to vigorously pursue his dream: "I love making people laugh, and it's taken a long time for me to realize that this really is a gift." ▾



COMEDIAN PAUL J. WILLIAMS BEST LITTLE HOMO IN TEXAS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
BY KELLIE GIBBS

Prepare to giggle.

If you have ever pondered why you kind of have to wonder about those homosexuals down in Texas – speculate no more because *Out Front Colorado* seems to have found the answer in comic Paul J. Williams.

With a southern charm that boils over into outrageousness, Williams is quick to explain, in a delightful southern twang, what being a Texan is all about.

"I'm a book keeper for an interior design showroom. Isn't that gay! My routine is very heavily based on my experiences growing up as a less-than conservative – or shall we say *creative* child in a southern Baptist home in south Texas.

"I do a lot of family-related material, experiences I've had in the church and my family's dealing with the fact that I'm gay. My family runs the whole spectrum of acceptance. From my mother who's like a one-woman P-FLAG chapter to my oldest brother who is a right-wing conservative fundamentalist Christian!"

Williams (who still speaks to his brother) likens the relationship to good old family values. "What's interesting about he and his wife...their desire for keeping the family together, overrides their disdain for my homosexuality. If there is a problem with my being gay, other members of the family will talk about it – but they won't talk to me about it! Which is just fine with me!

"I do know that my older brother and his wife have tried nailing my mother several times about 'you know what the Bible says about him!' and my mother is like 'I don't want to talk about it! I don't think it is any of your business and quite frankly, all we'll do is argue, so but out!!' And I'm like 'good for you, Mom!'

"I came out to my parents in October of one year, so my first Christmas was kind of an interesting experience. My mother and I were doing a little last minute shopping and she said, 'Why is it that its Christmas Eve and you're just now shopping? I'm done by November 1!'

"And I said, 'Mother. I'm a gay male. We can't shop that early because we don't know who our friends are going to be by Christmas!'

Such truthful humor interweaves throughout any conversation with Williams. Always morally respectful, he can't help but delve unencumbered into any subject matter.

"You'll always get people who gasp but I just tell them 'Oh, don't groan! You know it's true!!' It's like those RSVP cruises.

They say you can pay a year in advance but I may not like those people next year!"

Now thirty-something (we wouldn't dare ask what that something was) Williams' talent includes studio singing, community theater performing, a stint as a singing waiter and, alas, a full-fledged member of a cabaret-style comedy group called *Less Miserable*.

His full-range of professional experience and a knack for witnessing the divine around him helped Williams develop a scandalous collection of characters for his act. In particular, Nelda Pickens, a "bee-hived, chain-smoking, white-trash real estate agent who coughs and hacks her way through everything she has to say about her profession."

"Nelda is my baby! Mainly because she is so original and so uniquely Texan. So many people come up to me after the show and say 'that is my Aunt Ruth' or 'Oh, my God! She sold me my house!'

"So many widowed women in Dallas, who never worked in their lives, will go out and get a real estate license and suddenly start selling condos! And you know they've all been smoking since they were three!," laughed Williams, suddenly breaking into a raspy, irritating version of a pushy saleswoman.

"And with an ever-present cigarette hanging from their mouth. To me, those long brown cigarettes are the epitome of white-trash. I literally build the character in front of you during the show. I tell the audience that 'in Texas, hair is not teased – it's *pissed off!*' Then I put on this huge wig, light the cigarette and the audience is just screaming!"

"Nelda," who interacts with the audience as she scrutinizes "definitions of real estate terms" leaves Williams on the edge of live theater risk and excitement. "It allows me to fly. It's like doing circus without a net," Williams said.

Williams feels that utilizing comedy to build bridges with mainstream Americans can be a good thing – though it can present its own set of challenges. "A bridge can only go so far. When you have radical fundamentalism, I don't think there is a bridge. Maybe I'm being cynical. To those people who are willing to listen, much as I think there needs to be gay people who are willing

to listen to more conservative people...I think we both need to listen.

"I'm not a confrontational gay comic. I think there's a place for that, like with Lea DeLaria who is a very 'out dyke' which is great. The reason I've taken this route is that I want to be able to pull from the gay and straight community. I'm what many consider to be a safe gay comic. I talk a lot about what my being gay has to do with my day to day living – to show that they're a lot of similarities.

Many gay comedians, including Williams, believe that gay comedy will only last



so long as a central theme. "We accept it for what it is – it's the current craze. I need to have something to stand on when the craze passes. The other side of that coin is that there are always going to be gay people in gay bars who want to be entertained," said Williams.

Directing some sincere advice to aspiring stand-up comedians, Williams said, "You have to have a gift of quick thinking. I got my start doing singing telegrams which sounds so cheesy and so Bette Midler in Beaches. But, I swear that is one of the best ways to get your feet wet performing in front of people you don't know. I count that as an invaluable experience in my life."

Williams, who currently performs before standing-room only audiences, will light up the Auditorium Theatre for the 4th Annual Comedy Gayla, sponsored by KBDI Channel 12 and *Out Front Colorado*, on Saturday, February 1 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available at the Denver Center Box Office, Category Six Books, The Book Garden, The Word Is Out (Boulder) and TicketMaster (303) 830-8497. □

here hasn't been a dull moment in rehearsal or in the chorale office since Paul J. Williams joined the chorus in 1988 and the advertising sales staff in 1991. In fact, the TCC got an entire array of new members the day he joined...all in one person.

(The Sybil of the TCC) One never knows what voice or what character will surface next.

But you can rest assured it is always going to leave you in stitches.

And he sings like a dream as well.

Paul comes from a long line of funny. His grandfather was actually a real live clown. So, it is in the genes.

Paul quotes Lily Tomlin's experience as much akin to his own: "At an early age, I realized people were laughing at me, so I decided that I

might as well try to be funny!" It worked.

Also in 1988, Paul formed a cabaret-style comedy group including TCC member Pat Skinner, called LESS MISERABLE, playing to rave reviews in Dallas and across the U.S. for

several years. Now on his own (with his numerous alter egos), Paul is performing his one man show "The Best Little Homo in Texas" from L.A. to Key West and Provincetown and places beyond. Some of his favorite characters, of course, are Sister Helen Holy, Balch Springs real estate maven Nelda Pickens and his recent starring roles with the TCC as the Tex Mex Cafeteria gastronomic engineer and as the Wicked Witch in Oz.

poro file

PAUL J. WILLIAMS



for Paul having grown up in a Southern Baptist home in San Antonio.) This was the beginning of several annual birthday wishes from Sister Helen Holy to Ross.



In addition to his comedy career, Paul runs his own entertainment company

called Superior Productions and works as Bookkeeper for the design showroom of Pettigrew Associates. Look for Paul this Spring in the Texas Lottery "Lucky Dog" commercial as an over the top stereotypical make-up artist...it's a stretch.

Paul's perpetual state of singlehood is easy to understand. His dates can't pin him down to one character long enough to fall in love!

