

Backstage With the Flirtations

Carol

Four gay men in brightly colored shirts sang into color-coordinated microphones. "These are not mike covers; they're mike condoms. We practice safe sound."

"Are there any self-identified straight people out there?" "Well, you know, we have to ask, because you all blend in so well!" "We want to provide a safe and supportive environment for our homosexually challenged friends."

This is some of the stage banter that the Flirtations keep up during a performance. A show can last two hours, as it did in Burlington recently, and can touch women, men and families. At the sound check prior to the performance, a preschooler clad in a Flirts tee shirt told them that he knew the words to all of their songs. This merited a special dedication of Fred Small's lullaby, which encourages the child within each of us, "You can be anybody that you want to be. You can love whomever you will." How wonderful to think of children growing up singing those words!

A Flirtations show is an emotionally charged experience. Songs are thoughtfully chosen, with a personal connection for one or more of the group's members. If audience reaction is any measure, I'm not the only one who felt they often hit home. Tears and laughter were rapidly alternating responses. During a spoken piece, *One of Us*, the Flirts share poignant and humorous bits and pieces of their lives with us:

- "One of us attempted suicide."
- "One of us ran away from home at age 15."
- "One of us learned to cook on his own E-Z Bake Oven."
- "One of us went to his high school prom with his boyfriend."
- "One of us is a former U.S. Army MP."
- "One of us has never seen a porno film . . . but one of us has appeared in one."

Backstage before the show Jon, Jimmy, Cliff and Aurelio spoke freely during an interview. As one might have surmised, speaking freely is not out of character for

these guys. Having seen them perform as a quartet and with Michael Callen as their usual quintet, I was very interested in the effects of Michael's health on the group. He has had full-blown AIDS since 1982, is currently battling KS, and was not with the group in Burlington. During an engagement last summer in Provincetown, when all five group members performed, they told the audience that they had become a dysfunctional family, and were participating in group therapy during their stay.

Emphatically nodding his head, Cliff agreed that they had been quite dysfunctional at the time. Aurelio noted that they had a lot of accumulated baggage revolving around a number of issues, the biggest being Michael's illness, their responses to his illness and the issues surrounding death. "Those are pretty big issues that, I think, press all other kinds of buttons in families that are going through the loss of, or having to face a very serious illness of a loved one. It really throws a wrench into the group dynamics."

Last July in Los Angeles they were all, said Cliff, "acting out and acting up and being very strange with one another." That was apparently the catalyst for seeking therapy. "We spend so much time together", said Jimmy, "and work so closely together, that there are aspects of each other's personalities that drive us crazy. So when something horrible happens, like facing the loss of one of those family members, it's easy to focus in on someone's personality traits that irritate you." Their P'town therapist likened it to hammering your hand to forget your headache. In L.A. that's just what they were doing, with four of them ganging up on one member of the group.

The therapy experience was apparently successful. What has made it work, according to Cliff, is that they all care about each other. This became apparent in their discussion and interaction. They listened to each other (sometimes completing sentences for each other), and used a comfortable humor

throughout the conversation. Although razor sharp, the wit was always sensitive, evidence of their mutual respect.

Jimmy described Michael's recent "amazing" recovery and subsequent regression. The group's acting out returned, but there was an awareness of the underlying causes. Aurelio said that they could identify what was going on, "Oh. What I'm REALLY upset about is this. What is it that Michael says?" Cliff responded, "This is not what it's about." This last time they determined just what it was about, and found comfort in being able to identify their misplaced anger and its cause. As a result, they were able to be more direct about things, and avoid what they described as the scapegoat ploy.

The Flirts have four-part and five-part arrangements of their material, although their first performance as a quartet was several months ago. Their initial response to Michael's illness and the possibility that he would sometimes be unable to perform was to quickly find a sub. This turned out to be a much more challenging and involved task than anticipated. Although they have worked with several people who, as Aurelio put it, "might have been good Michael substitutes for one reason or another", there was more to it than that. "We weren't able to embrace them as a Flirt." In their substitute search they found someone who was "okay." This fell short of their needs. "The bottom line," said Aurelio, "is, I think it has to be more than okay. It has to be . . ." "Family", finished Cliff. Aurelio agreed, "It has to be family. It's like you're coming into a family that's already set. . . like an in-law coming in. It has to be fabulous vocal parts, good sense of process, so it's hard."

Although they described their first performance as a quartet as terrifying, Jimmy pinpointed the root of the anxiety and terror. "It's very easy when Michael is with us to go into denial of what his condition is at this point, and I think having to perform as four people is a major slap-in-the-face/

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