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CRUISE ENTERTAINERS

by JIM GLADSTONE

“If most of the passengers on a ship don’t know who I am by the third day,” says pianist, vocalist, and sing-along ringmaster Matt Yee, “I don’t feel like I’m doing my job.” Proudly corny and often verging-on-porny, Yee is a one-of-a-kind entertainer. He spends nearly 50% of each year away from his Honolulu home, much of it urging cruise travelers, on both gay and mainstream trips, to chime in with him through a repertoire that shifts from “Candle in the Wind” and “We Will Rock You” to the theme from *Green Acres* over the course of a single raucous hour. “I think of my shows,” Yee says, “As feeling like church—without God and with booze.”

Entertainers like Yee are among the unsung heroes of cruise vacations. When gay travelers return home from a cruise, they may quickly boast to friends about exotic ports of call, lavish buffets, and one-night performances by big name acts such as Patti Lupone or Chita Rivera, but it’s the dozens of lesser-known singers, dancers, comics, and specialty artists like Yee who keep the seafaring crowds entertained and the energy flowing night after night, cruise after cruise.

Passport asked a diverse handful of performers to reflect on their personal histories along with the joys, the lessons, and the memorable moments of showbiz at sea. From a straight female singer who recently made her cruise debut on an Atlantis adventure to a longtime production show dancer who has abandoned ship to seek his fortune on Broadway, they share insights and anecdotes that offer fresh perspectives on the cruise experience.

Twenty years ago, **Matt Yee** (www.mattye.com) would never have guessed he'd be generating the bulk of his income regaling holiday travelers with show tunes and double entendre dirty jokes (often while sporting a muumuu and a ratty blond wig). The Hawaiian-born son of financial advisors, Yee, who sang and played piano avocationally from the age of three, won a music scholarship to Dartmouth University and moved on to law school at the University of Pennsylvania.

"I was doing mergers and acquisitions in the boomtime 1980s," he recalls. "You're supposed to feel so fortunate having an opportunity like that, but I realized that I hated it."

Yee walked away from his white-shoe firm feeling somewhat adrift. While finding his sea legs as a gay man during the height of the AIDS crisis, he dabbled in real estate development in San Francisco and, ultimately, back home in Hawaii. It was during this period that he returned to music, beginning to develop an act and stage persona while playing in gay piano bars.

"I wasn't making much money at it, but I was building my craft. One of my first paying solo gigs was a show at the March on Washington in 1993. I started traveling to do Pride events and men's gatherings in different cities."

During this period, Yee also led a party band in Hawaii, sporting Janns World outfits and playing a blend of reggae and Hawaiian pop.

"We had four top ten hits on Hawaiian radio," he recalls. While Hawaii is a small market, it kept him in steady local mainstream gigs while he put together his first full cabaret show in gay bars, a tribute to diva singers (Yee has been called a cross between Elton John and Margaret Cho) in which he interwove humorous and inspiring stories about his mother. The show continually changed, with material being added, dropped, and resurfaced. "Every couple of months," he

remembers, "I felt like I was doing an entirely new act."

A write-up in *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* brought Yee to the attention of American Hawaii Cruises in 2001, leading to his first onboard bookings.

His gay bar experience of constantly refreshing and evolving his act served Yee well on ships, where some guests attended his performances three or four nights over the course of a trip but never saw the same show twice.

The cruise industry is a small world, and soon enough Yee was invited on gigs for mainstream lines like Royal Caribbean, Norwegian, Holland America, Celebrity, Carnival, and Oceania, as well as gay charters for Atlantis Events.

"When friends ask me if they should go on a gay cruise or what I call 'an ordinary cruise,' I always say to go gay. There's an incredible feeling of freedom on a gay cruise. It's like a big gay island and there's a real sense of community."

"The way gay cruises are pictured in promotions doesn't match reality," says Yee, referring to the hot, swimsuit-clad models in brochures and on websites. "You'd never expect to see a jumbo Asian queen like me on board...but there are plenty of us. There's a much wider variety of people than you see in the ads: guys from their 20s to their 80s and many couples. Its not the floating bathhouse that some people suspect," he says

"At my sing-along shows, and this is true on ordinary cruises as well as gay ones, I consider it part of my job to help people let down their defenses and interact with strangers. I've seen people make friends from other parts of the world who they then made a point of traveling with in the future. I met the man who invented the monorail at one of my shows on a gay cruise!" he exclaims.

"You know, there's something fabulous about everyone around you, and you should make it a point to find out what that is," he adds.

Matt Yee



The first time I worked a gay cruise, I was blown away by the combination of diversity and community,” says **Bruce Vilanch** (www.brucevilanch.com), who has performed on one or two Atlantis and RSVP sailings a year since 2002). The writer, actor, and raconteur is well known for crafting comic banter for Bette Midler and the Academy Awards broadcasts, and for following in the mincing footsteps of Paul Lynde as a campy center square on *Hollywood Squares*. “There’s nothing quite like it, because you’re in a world where there’s no judgment from outside, and you get to see how varied the gay community really is. It’s kind of a revelation,” he says.

“I’ve also done charter cruises with nothing but Jews, and those were fun, too. It’s great to have a sense of diversity and of community all at once. On a mainstream cruise, people from all walks of life are not necessarily interested in mixing with each other, so you don’t get this sense of connection between everyone on the ship that you do on a gay cruise,” he notes.

“You know, on Royal Caribbean’s Oasis of the Seas, they do a production of *Hairspray*. They’ve approached me about the part of Edna Turnblad.” (A role he played on Broadway in 2005). “But people who are in that show tell me that at every sailing there’s at least one passenger who complains that there’s a drag queen in the show, or that he was unhappy to see a musical that featured an interracial romance,” Vilanch admits.

“I don’t like feeling that I’m in danger of shocking someone, and I don’t want to be just another entertainer that people end up seeing because I happen to be there and the show is free. My rule is that I look to perform for people who will get my type of humor and who specifically want to see me, not to just fill an empty evening slot in their cruise schedule with whatever entertainment happens to be available. On gay cruises, my type of humor translates. The crowd gets me. Gay audiences want their humor raunchier when they’re away from home,” he says.

Vilanch, who describes himself as “hyper-observant” and writes new material for each performance based on what he notices on each cruise, remarks that there are also differences from one gay cruise to the next. What he’s noted in developing jokes may help others choose the right vacation: “Look, it’s not that hard or that expensive to get to Fort Lauderdale or Southern California, so the Mexican and Caribbean cruises tend to have the youngest guys who are more focused on partying than traveling. I mean one shitty fishing village is pretty much the same as the next; you hardly need to leave the ship. People who do the planning and save the money to go on a cruise through Rome or the South of France really want to see those places—the trip has a different tempo. Alaska cruises get older, less body-conscious guys who don’t necessarily want to lie out in the sun. I definitely adjust my material to suit the crowd, varying the balance of observational humor about the cruise itself and my backstage Hollywood tales. I hardly object to spending my days surrounded by hunky guys in loaded Speedos, but obviously I’m older myself, I don’t have a whole lot of Miley Cyrus stories.”

My mom went through a cruising phase when I was between 12 and 14, so I’d been on a few cruises” says the Los Angeles–bred, New York–based jazz and cabaret singer **Natalie Douglas** (www.nataliedouglas.com), who often plays legendary Manhattan nightspots like Birdland and the Café Carlyle, but had never performed on a ship before being booked for last summer’s Atlantis gay charter from Venice to Rome on the Celebrity Silhouette, a sailing with a tremendous slate of entertainers that also included Matt Yee and Kathy Griffin.

“There was a feeling of camaraderie on the gay cruise,” she recalls. Echoing Vilanch: “that seemed very different from what I’d experienced in the past. Malcolm, the cruise director, created some lovely moments where the whole ship kind of bonded. Our first night, he told all the guests that there



Bruce Vilanch



Natalie Douglas

Photo: Lynn Redmile

Vickie Shaw with Olivia Travel



were many passengers over 60 and 70 years old, and that one man would be celebrating his 92nd birthday during the cruise; and he encouraged all the younger passengers to make a point of meeting these men, and thanking them for the work they had to do and the lives they had to live to get the gay community where it is today. He encouraged the 2,600 male guests to make a point of meeting the 22 women on board. He also pointed out that there were 30 gay men from Russia on the cruise, and how it took bravery for them to be there, openly, refusing to fear their government.”

Growing up in the 1970s, Douglas spent a lot of time with her mother’s best friend, “my ‘Auntie Floyd’” and his partner Harold, and she saw firsthand the challenges they faced as gay men at the time. “It was great for me to see the sense of ease people had on the Atlantis cruise. There’s a celebratory air of ‘We won’t be intimidated. We won’t hide. We’re the majority right now,’” she says.

Vickie Shaw (www.vickieshaw.com), a comedienne who has performed stand-up and has done emcee duties on Olivia Travel’s lesbian cruises since 1996 agrees with Douglas and Vilanch: “When my partner’s mother turned 80, we went on a straight cruise with the family. I had fun, but what I noticed is that we stuck to ourselves. People came on the cruise in small groups, and they stayed in those groups. They didn’t branch out. The women on Olivia cruises have a sense of themselves as all being part of one big group.”

She continues: “They’re not only on the cruise to travel, but to share an experience with a couple thousand other lesbians. That’s a pretty rare experience to be able to have anywhere. And many of the women on these cruises aren’t comfortable being fully out in the rest of their lives. Everyone seems at ease and personable to each other. It’s great for me as a comedienne. It’s empowering. I actually feel stronger at the end of an Olivia Cruise.”

Even when Olivia, Atlantis, and RSVP charter whole ships and bring a small supplement of LGBT personnel aboard, the majority of the ships’ service staff is straight.

“People from the Celebrity staff told me that the weeks their ships have LGBT charters are their favorite times to work,” says Douglas.

“They say that the guests are happier and treat them more kindly.”

“There’s a little-known song I’ve been doing since 1992 called ‘Not That Different,’ which is about people overcoming their differences and finding common ground. When I did it on the Atlantis cruise. I got a bit of a shiver. It seemed to resonate in a special way,” she tells me.

Beyond the joy of being paid to perform for extraordinarily appreciative audiences, Douglas says that her maiden voyage had additional benefits: “From a marketing perspective, it’s a great audience-building opportunity to be seen by thousands of people from around the country and the world without having to travel to all the places they live. They can go home and spread the word to friends about my CDs and my touring dates.”

“Personally,” Douglas recalls, her voice almost giddy, “I got to bring my husband along and make it into a pretty great vacation for us. I did four shows in ten days, but they were at 11 P.M., so we had a lot of time we could spend together. I happen to be a huge history buff. Since I was a kid, I’ve been reading and watching television programs about the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece. I’ve performed in London, but before being hired for this cruise, I’d never had a chance to go to Europe. And there I was. In my childhood storybooks. In Santorini. In Corfu. There were quite a few moments I had tears in my eyes,” she says.

While Natalie Douglas was able to bring along her husband for ten days at sea, Matt Yee’s cruise performances are the mainstay of his career for the time being, leading him to spend large blocks of time away from his partner of 19 years, Paul, a nurse. “I never imagined I’d be at this for so long,” Yee says. “In 2013 alone, I’ve been all over the place: Singapore, Cancún, Australia, Shanghai, Paris, Venice, and Prague.”

So how do they stay connected? “Paul and I Skype pretty much every time I get off the ship at a port and find some reasonably priced Wi-Fi. I’m like holding up the phone camera and going ‘Hi honey. Here’s Vietnam!’”

“There’s always a possibility of changing things at some point. I’d like to book more concerts and corporate events on land, because they can pay well and don’t take me away for such long stretches. I’ve built

a fan base from all the cruises, and people I meet on ships have helped me get bookings in their cities and for their companies,” he says.

“When I’m working on cruises, I miss Paul. I miss our yard—there’s not much that’s organic on a ship. And I miss Dunkin’ Donuts coffee,” he laughs.

“Right now, though, I’m talking to you on the phone from home,” says Yee. “I’ve been here for a few weeks between gigs. And actually, being in one place for this long feels kind of weird to me now too. My mind starts to leave for the next trip before it’s even happening,” he admits.

“I love what I do, but I have to hang onto a sense of balance and self-containment. I need to work hard at the whole ‘Be Here Now’ philosophy,” he concludes.

Performing on a cruise ship is an incredible opportunity to combine work and travel.” says **Bjorn Bolinder**, a native Minnesotan, who was a dance troupe member in Royal Caribbean’s shipboard production of *Chicago* and other production shows for six years beginning in 2005. “I’d never really been anywhere, and it gave me a chance to see so much of the world,” he says.

“But you can get stuck because there’s something seductively convenient about it. There are some amazingly talented performers who get jobs on ships when they’re very young. Some become ‘lifers’ without thinking much about what their greatest potential might be,” he adds.

“For dancers in particular,” says Bolinder, “The body doesn’t last forever. It’s important to think about your future. How can you do your best dancing? And what will you do afterward?” he wonders.

Unlike featured performers like Douglas who contract for one cruise at a time, production show performers sign on to sail consecutive cruises for six-month stretches. They also are housed in dorm-like staff quarters as opposed to more private and spacious guest cabins.

“One of the critical things you need to be able to do as a crew performer is to make good use of your down time,” says Bolinder. “Once you’ve rehearsed a show and got it going smoothly, you have tons of time on your hands. It really freaks some people out, and they can end up drinking a lot, or binge watching eight hours of a TV series a day. It’s tricky, because nobody’s telling you that you’re not being productive. It’s not as if you’re not doing your job well. It’s just that your workdays are very compressed, and you don’t have a lot of other responsibilities. You can get a little lost and depressed. It takes discipline to give your life structure,” he confesses.

“Back in high school,” says Bolinder, “I worked in a photo portrait studio, but during college at Northwestern University and then working as a professional dancer in Chicago, it fell by the wayside.”

But long periods at sea with no obligations for many hours a day gave Bolinder the opportunity to re-immense himself in photography. With beautiful ports of call and the ever-changing light of ocean travel, he was able to sharpen his talents, eventually beginning to produce headshots and professional portraits for his fellow performers. Today, he supplements show business with his own small business (www.facebook.com/bjornbolinderphotography).

Like downtime, another double-edged sword of life as a contracted



Bjorn Bolinder

performer is the microcosmic community that gets built in the crew’s dormitory-like living quarters.

“There are lots of shipboard romances,” he explains, “and for better or worse, they tend to move more quickly than relationships do on land. Because there’s a zero-tolerance policy regarding fraternizing between crew and guests, the dating pool is very clear and very limited. Not a lot of fish in the sea. And because your whole day-to-day life is taking place in such a confined space, with loads of free time it can be hard to set boundaries. I mean, you really can’t go anywhere that’s more than five minutes away from someone else on the ship,” he says.

“I had a relationship with another crew member named Ryan over two and a half years. For eight months we were on board the same ship together, other times it was long distance, but we would sometimes take a break between contracts and spend time with each other at our parents’ homes,” he recalls.

“You don’t just do your gig on a cruise ship,” says Matt Yee. “You’re kind of on all the time. It’s like *Orange is the New Black*; you’re thrown in there and you’ve got to stay on point and perform your role. So it’s only going to work if your role is true to your genuine self. You need to treat the whole ship as a professional working environment. You mingle. You smile if you’re within ten feet of anyone, and you learn to find something appealing in anyone who talks to you. I think it has made me a kinder person.” ■