

Performance



DANIEL CORRIGAN

Acting up: Patrick Scully hosts Patrick's Cabaret May 1-2 at 8 p.m.

A Living Room

A curled and yellowed note taped to the storefront door reads "Please take your shoes off." I stand near a tabletop garden, pull at my boot heel, and nearly crash into the greeting of a big, big-hearted dog. From his kitchen, Patrick Scully calls, "Down, Boss! Old sign, come on in."

The room is brighter than the sky outside, with light from the front windows flaring across floor-to-ceiling whitewash. Other than a hammock strung in place of folding chairs, things look about the same as they did the other night, when Scully hosted his Patrick's Cabaret. The lived-in feel was strong then too, with an open area stretching across the length of the room. An image of Paulina Chan flashes in my mind, a drag performer who swept across that floor "passing" for an MTV vamp.

Scully, who will perform at the Walker May 9, opens his rehearsal space one weekend a month to a half-dozen performing artists. Some he invites, some solicit him. Each is given about 20 minutes to do whatever they want, plus a split of the door.

A longtime member of the late Contact Improvisation group, Scully never auditions the performers; he simply emcees and, typically, performs something himself, generally unplanned. His only rule is that a performer see at least one Cabaret, just so they know what they're getting into. "Being an artist means getting clear and being honest," explains Scully. "This is about dropping the pretension of the high sophisticated technical support, so you can really see what the performer is doing."

Earlier this month, Chris Cinque (*Growing Up Queer in America*) sauntered out of Scully's bathroom, geared up in high drag; she headed toward the "stage" and, throwing her head back, split, incensed. Scully hadn't set up her props. Happily indulging the diva, he apologized, pulled her rig from a corner and carefully arranged it all. Cinque, never dropping out of character, continued, "The only woman I have ever loved was Elizabeth Taylor."

Later, comic Kohl Miner (*Native Fruit*) lived out his fantasy to be a cheerleader in high school. The audience, equipped with "Jan Brady" cue sheets, waited through a few more tech problems, then watched Miner shake the shreds of his newspaper pom-poms all over the floor. Recalling that evening, Scully laughs, "I started to think, 'Wow, people are going to think [the mistakes] are part of the show.' But, for me, the informality part of it is."

A perfect show, to Scully, would resemble an Eartha Kitt performance he once saw in Denver. "She was in a pretty small nightclub. She sang, stopped singing and started talking about something, then moved from talking into singing. She was herself and a performer." That's how Scully organizes his shows, saying of the Cabaret: "It is me."

That analogy stretches beyond an improvisation artistic style. A gay activist, Scully makes the place "queer-friendly," as described by Tim Miller, the California performance "artist as citizen" and vocal activist with ACT UP L.A. Miller, a member of the NEA Four currently suing the government for revoking their National Endowment for the Arts grants, arrives in Minneapolis next week for a two-week teaching residency at the University of Minnesota. He'll perform at the Walker May 16, a week after Scully.

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A Miller request to conduct free performance workshops for gay men led to Scully offering his studio. It's a place Miller knows. "I've seen it in a lot of videos," he jokes: He's established a fund for gay and lesbian artists (which awarded a grant to Carolyn Goelzer), and submission tapes from the Twin Cities often show Scully's white walls.

Cinque says she first read *Growing Up Queer* when Patrick's Cabaret was held in a church gymnasium. "It was warm and very mixed, straight, gay, and racially: Your hip-straight types and outwardly gay crowd. I'd say that says something about Patrick's ability to bring groups of people together." Scully used St. Stephen's gym for four years, finally moving into the storefront in 1989. By most accounts, little else has changed.

The world of his cabaret is one way he stays healthy, insists Scully, who tested HIV-positive six years ago. He says he may be physically okay, but society is trying to kill him and he intends to change that. Growing serious, he lays down what sounds like a credo. "I'm surrounded by a world that has a language in this epidemic and a set of images in this epidemic that are very death-affirming, not life-affirming. There is no way I can be honest in my work and not have it informed by the struggle that I have to stay healthy and alive and vital in the face of such a strong death wish."

Then he looks up, smiles, and his body relaxes. "To be an artist isn't just technique. You think about things, you talk to people about it, think about it some more, talk about it some more. Have enough conversations to turn the 'I wish I would have said that' into saying it and then put that on the stage."

—Mary Anne Welch

Patrick's Cabaret takes place at 8 p.m. May 1-2, 506 E. 24th St., Minneapolis; 222-2738.