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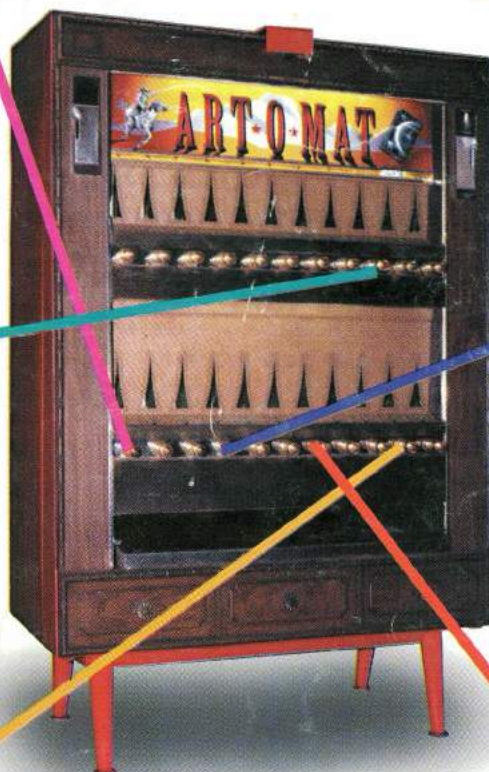
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Joe Watts's High Drama

Scenes in the life of a gay theater director

by Ann Walton Sieber

While a 12-year-old growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Joe Watts found himself on board a bus full of Baptists from his aunt's church, Southern Hills Baptist, going to see fellow church-member Anita Bryant compete for the title of Miss Oklahoma. As Joe remembers it, Anita wore a white dress with red piping, sang "Till There Was You" from *The Music Man*, and when Joe went up afterward with his sister to congratulate the new beauty queen, she kissed him full on the mouth.

At this point in the story, Joe usually makes a point of turning and fake-spitting. Although not yet an adolescent, Joe knew enough about himself not to be exactly overjoyed at this lusty heterosexual windfall. Indeed, Joe already had some experience with beauty queens...because he had been one. In his Cub Scout den's talent show, he'd been chosen to play Miss America. "It was in the auditorium in Will Rogers High School auditorium, where my sister and Anita Bryant were in school," Joe remembers. "When I was crowned Miss America, I was presented with roses just like in Atlantic City, and then a Cub Scout planted in the audience came up and gave me a Hollywood contract. At which point I fainted—to thunderous applause. It was terribly exciting." One of the many mementos Joe has from a life lived with aplomb and a certain gal-lows' style is a photograph, enlarged and elaborately framed, showing the young Joe in his beauty queen bathing suit, looking fully the fey young girl, complete with elegant legs and high heels.

"How could anybody who was Miss America," Joe says, holding up the picture of his younger self, "not turn out like I have?"

How Joe Watts has turned out so far certainly is a most remarkable story, and one that would rival the plots of the gay plays he's spent the greater part of his 58 years directing, producing, and generally doing whatever is needed to make sure the shows go on.

Many people know Joe as the community's long-standing impresario of all things gay, from his work with the Diversity Theatre with John David Etheridge in the early '80s to the many diverse productions of The Group, Joe's roving we-can-perform-anywhere theater, including 14 years

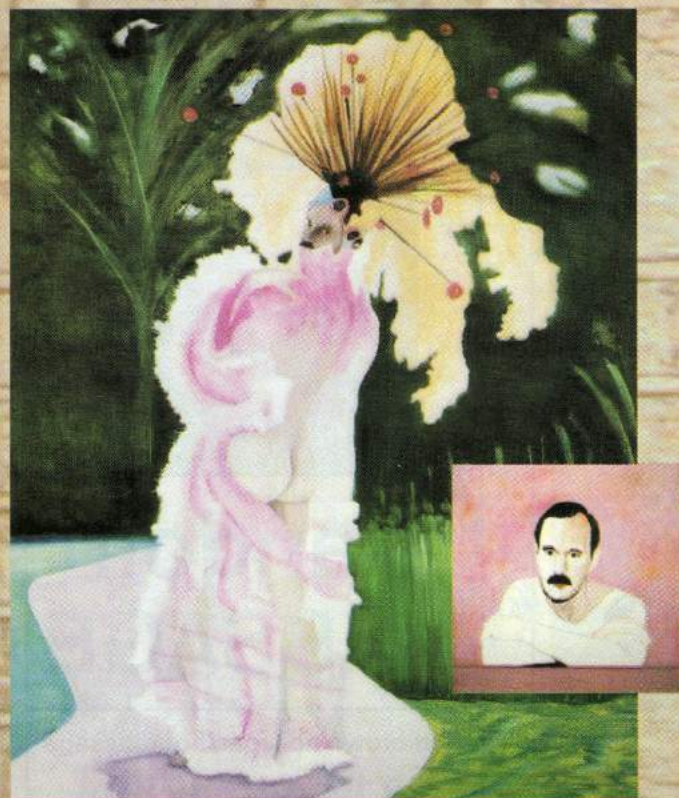
of mounting the official theater production for Pride Week. The *Houston Press* dubbed Joe Watts "the grandfather of gay theater in Houston." William Albright, longtime theater critic at the *Houston Post*, wrote in 1988: "For gay theater, New



Joe Watts as Miss America: "My mother always said I had beautiful legs."



York had The Glines, San Francisco has Theatre Rhinoceros—and Houston has whatever company Joe Watts just founded.” Annise Parker said it even more plainly: “Gay and lesbian theater in Houston is synonymous with Joe Watts.”



Joe Watts as painted by his friend Lacy Hedrick: “I don’t trust a guy who can’t camp.”

And now, the drama queen of Montrose is moving into a new stage in his dramatic life, because he finally has a venue to call his own: an intimate and malleable space that is part of elegant Sonoma restaurant. Dubbing his latest incarnation Theatre New West, it made an exuberant grand debut with *Fairy Tales*, a witty and moving revue. The next Theatre New West show, two one-acts with the curiosity-piquing names *One Tit, a Dyke, and Gin and The Bathtub*, will open September 15, and play through November 4. And throughout, Joe Watts’s productions have been some of the most consistently high quality and exciting among all the theater produced in Houston.

In Joe Watts’s life, it can be hard to separate the drama he acts in and directs from the drama in his life, and they have fed into each other. He seems to be the type of actor who feels at home on stage because high drama is all he’s ever known.

To begin with, Joe comes from a family that sounds like they belong in a Tennessee Williams play. His father was a conflicted alcoholic (“a beautiful, beautiful human being, but a real Jekyll and Hyde”), one of 12 brothers, whose mother died right after giving birth to his only sister. Joe’s mother was one of four sisters whose parents died when they were young; when the orphanage burned down, Joe’s mother and his aunts were all dispersed to different families to lead Cinderella-in-the-ashes lives of rejection and servitude. Joe’s sister had a 500-pound motor drop on her head; although she survived, she was left with poignant disabilities: she could neither menstruate nor cry tears. After Joe Watts’s father killed himself, his beloved mother continued in a series of marriages to abusive alcoholics. “You don’t have enough paper,” Joe says dryly, as I try to keep up with the tragic snarl of his family history.

As for Joe, he moved out of the house while only a junior in high school to live with his first lover, Terry. “I was a child bride,” Joe says, his sentimental side blossoming, “a little housewife. I’d come home from high school and cook dinner. Terry was the light of

my life, and he adored me in his own way." One day Terry gave Joe a small present...a black and white '57 Ford Fairlane convertible. You don't need to belong to the Classic Chassis club to know that was one exquisite car. "If you think I get excitable now, you should have seen me back then," Joe says.

And in this magic stage-coach, Terry whisked the teenage Joe away to California, Hollywood to be exact, saying he'd just come into a small inheritance. They arrived in the star-struck town and got an apartment—Joe remembers he was enchanted with the gold glitter sparkling in the ceiling—and had one night on the town, at the Moulin Rouge nightclub at the corner of Hollywood and Vine, where they saw Sammy Davis Jr. The next day Terry's

Joe proclaimed he would not go on, and the entire cast and production staff staged a collective plea to the prima donna to please put on his socks and go on stage. He ate it up.)

In 1969, he went to Boston with a lady friend and happened to see *Boys in the Band*, that landmark piece about the sadness and anger of the era. "It just f---king blew my mind, every f---king character in this play is *queer*," Joe says, remembering back to his youthful self sitting on the front row. "How did they let this happen!?" He went back to see the play every night that week. "I'd look up at the ceiling of the theater saying, *Please God, let me play Michael*."

The following year, Joe's prayers were answered and he was cast as Michael in a production of *Boys in the Band* staged by

Baytown Little Theater. "God, you did answer my prayers," Joe says. "But did you have to make it Baytown?"

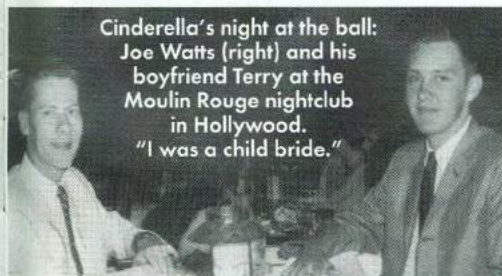
Joe came down with hepatitis the week before the show

was to open. "I told my doctor that I'd waited 14 years to play Michael; I don't care if I have to crawl on the stage." And although he was jaundiced and too weak to go to his day job, when he hit the boards, he found he had all the energy in the world.

Given this fateful entrée into gay drama, Joe teamed up with John David Etheridge's Diversity Theatre, which premiered with a crowd-pleasing all-male version of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* at the Pink Elephant, then the oldest gay bar in Texas.

But God was not done with Joe and *Boys in the Band*. Later that year, John David asked Joe to direct the show. "But I've never directed in my life," Joe objected. "But you know the script backwards and

continued on p. 68



Cinderella's night at the ball: Joe Watts (right) and his boyfriend Terry at the Moulin Rouge nightclub in Hollywood. "I was a child bride."

stepfather appeared and the clock struck 12: the inheritance was a lie, and Joe's night at the ball had been underwritten with hot checks. (Terry went on to open a gay adult bookstore in Chicago, the first there; the last time Joe saw him was on the screen of an adult movie house here, announcing coming attractions.)

With a flair for drama already fully formed, Joe started acting, first in Tulsa, and then Houston, playing roles from a bit part in *Little Mary Sunshine*, to Bottom the donkey in *Midsummer's Night's Dream* ("Bottom, now there was type-casting," he quips wickedly), to the male lead in Stages' premiere production. (The audiences at Stages were so small that one especially dismal night—when only a single married couple had come to watch—

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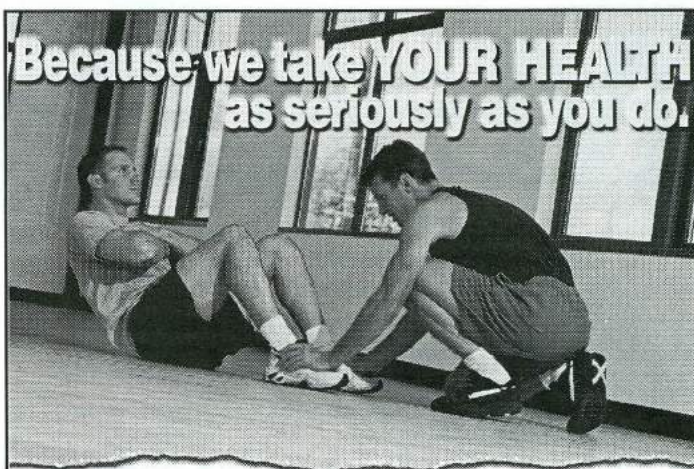
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Joe Watts

continued from p. 65

forwards," John countered. Never one to be shy, Joe both directed and starred in the iconic play, never muttering a peep to his cast about being a greenhorn director.

"That was it, I was bit," Joe said of the experience. "I lost interest in acting, I just wanted to direct."

Joe's list of directing credits can sound like a gay history of Houston. Dignity Theatre gave benefits for Anne Wheeler's campaign at the gay bar A Place in the Sun, and for the dread Proposition 2 in 1985 at Marion Coleman's Kindred Spirits. They also presented the first "official theater night of Gay Pride Week" with a madcap re-creation of the Stonewall riot. After John David left Houston, Joe started The Group (Theatre Workshop), which did weekly theater readings and critiques in its first year, leading up to its first production, the one-man play *One*, in 1985, the first play dealing with AIDS to be presented in Houston. After several more plays dealing with AIDS, Joe said the community begged for something lighter, and he obliged with *Drag Queens from Outer Space*. Many productions followed, 30 in all. Many were campy, some dra-

matic. Most were gay in content, although not all.

Joe has also presented four plays specifically focusing on women. He is the only man ever to produce and direct *Dos Lesbos*; although the script stipulates that it can only be produced by women, Joe was able to get special dispensation from the playwright. ("I have to be an honorary lesbian by now," he says.) Joe's next production is a night of two lesbian one-acts, and he's been taking every opportunity to lecture his male friends that they had better come show the same support that lesbians have been showing for all the gay male shows through the years.

Being a gay theater director has its moments. Like the time an actor was forced to bow out before a show opened, and a friend appeared on Joe's doorstep with a strapping young "actor" freshly recruited from the Galleon for a midnight audition. (Joe gave him the part, but later regretted it.) Or the time two men who were supposed to be playing a leather love scene found themselves, ahem, unable to proceed with the script, and one decided he'd better drop out of the production.

Joe thinks that he developed his urge to direct early, from the role he assumed with his tragic family.

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"I was the leader of the family at age eight, which has made me awesomely independent," he says. "I'm a leader, not a follower. I've never known what being a follower is. The leaders are the boss. That's my role.... Even when I've had relationships and boyfriends, I can't let anybody do anything. That transferred to my theater."

That 8-year-old has now translated into a 58-year-old

If it's possible to play the straight man to oneself, Joe does it, with a sense of comic timing that I can only marvel at.

man, given to wearing purple shirts that manage to be restrained, who has a dapper mustache that matches his balding pate. His day job is the very stable and respectable position of director of finance for KRTS, the arts radio station. In outward demeanor, he summons up words like "dour" and "morose"—and lord have mercy, he can dish the dirt on

every theater and theater critic in town. But Joe's sardonic, catty persona should not be taken at face value. Joe has that weird actor's mix of world-weary sophistication and hokey sentimentality. ("I am in love with love" is a common Joe wistful refrain.) And if it's possible to play the straight man to oneself, Joe does it, with a sense of comic timing that I can only marvel at. It is an innate

wry nuance that cannot be learned other than through a total immersion in life as an ongoing theater of the absurd.

When I was heading over to talk to Joe in the heart-of-the-Montrose apartment he's rented for 30 years, he told a friend who had called, "Martha Stewart and Rex Reed are on their

way over here to catch me in my environ, so I don't have time to talk." Joe repeats this conversation while seating himself grandly on a velvet green loveseat and lighting a cigarette. ("I need it in order to be dramatic.") Every available piece of blank wall has been given over to theater posters from Joe's shows. A painting of Joe by his friend Lacy Hedrick

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stares moodily over its subject's shoulder, half of his face in clown white, half in natural skin tone. Another large painting by Lacy shows Joe from behind, casting a demure come-hither glance over his shoulder, clad only in a Mardi Gras headdress and revealing feather boa.

"I think that I have so much to draw from," Joe says, reflectively. "If I had led this perfect little life, I couldn't possibly be the director I am today. It gives me so much insight into the human psyche. I love to watch what I call popcorn TV. Or go to restaurants by myself and study people. There are so many expressions and gestures you can pick up and make use of. I like to find some sort of quirk or idiosyncrasy in a character that may not be on the page—it's the little things that when you add them up they equal something really interesting.

"There are times when I feel sorry for myself because I've seen so much ugliness. But I've seen so much of the good, and that has to have made me know how to make people real on the stage. It's all of that that's made me the director I am."

The only hateful reaction Joe has received through the years was not because of gay content, but when he did the

heterosexual but mixed-race *Dutchman*, by Amiri Baraka, and was threatened by the KKK. He admits it really did scare him, but nothing further happened.

In an instance of reverse discrimination, his former theater partner John David refused to cast a talented actor in a role when he found out the man was straight. Joe was enraged. Joe's casts often include a mixture of gay and straight actors, and his audiences are likewise mixed. "I don't feel like I have a target audience," Joe says. "We have tons of heterosexuals who come and love the shows."

In selecting actors, Joe will admit he can be motivated by physical beauty. He says he's going to cast a beautiful woman for a nude bathtub scene for his next show, to give the female members of the audience a little "eye candy." "I adore androgynous-looking women," he says. "I think they're exciting as hell.

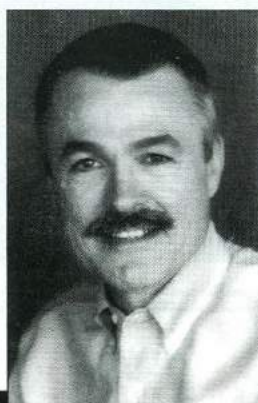
"I'm not the same way about men," he continues. "But I do like a man who is

Theatre New West's latest production is two women's one-act plays: *One Tit*, a Dyke & Gin and *The Bathtub*. In *One Tit*, a heterosexual woman who has had a mastectomy finds herself accidentally locked in her doctor's office, and spends the whole night with the gay female security guard, passing the time playing gin rummy and growing close despite their difference. *The Bathtub* is about a lesbian couple, one of whom has been in the bathtub for two weeks and refuses to come out (of the tub, that is). Directed by Joe Watts, they feature Tanya Lunstroth, Claire Hart-Palumbo, Elva Evans, and Josephine John (who many may remember as the founder/director of the Generating Company/Dances). • Playing Fridays & Saturdays, Sept. 15–Nov. 4, on the ground floor of the Sonoma Restaurant, 1415 California (one block north of Westheimer, between Waugh and Commonwealth). Call 713/522-2204 for information or 713/394-0464 for reservations. \$20.

Elva Evans (left) and Claire Hart-Palumbo share a moment in *The Bathtub*, directed by Joe Watts.



JOE WATTS



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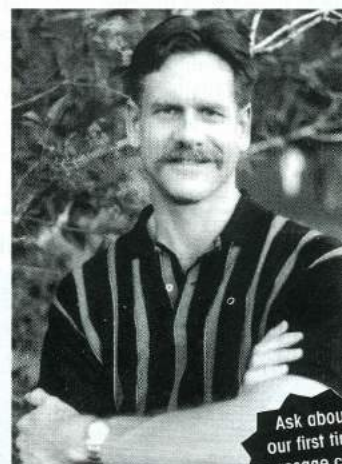
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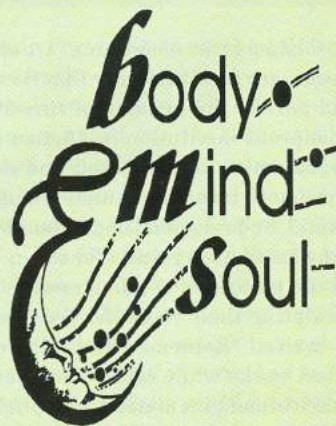
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androgynous in his actions, is able to be soft. I don't trust a guy who can't camp. *Oh, I'm above that,*" Joe mimics disdainfully.

But in selecting actors, the physical is, of course, just the beginning. "Even more," he says, "are they making sense, are they making eye contact as quickly as possible? I look for my definition of honesty."

To be honest myself, I must tell you that Joe Watts and I have some history together, as one of his plays really hit home with me at a crucial point in my life. Back in the mid-'80s when I was a new writer, I spent several years reviewing theater for the now-defunct *Public News*. After seeing Joe Watts's production of *Dutchman*, I went on a young theater critic's frustrated rant about the generally low quality of theater I was finding in Houston and the general apathy of audiences. *Dutchman* was the notable exception, I wrote, calling it "stunning theater" and wondering why there wasn't more theater with the same kind of burning intensity. I closed my review with "Go see *Dutchman*, damn it!"

As a result, I've always held a special place in my heart for Joe Watts. My guess is a lot of people in the community do. ■



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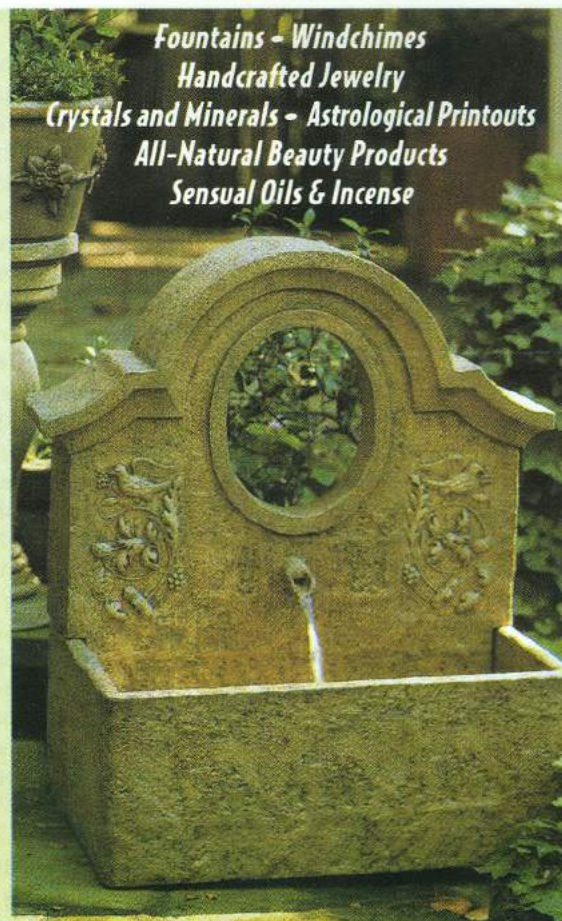
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