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## Calling Dr. Kinsey

Behind the scenes with America's favorite dragapella beauty shop quartet.

By Sarah Coleman

**IT'S EIGHT O'CLOCK** on a Tuesday evening, and in the comfortable living room of a Victorian house in the Fillmore, four men are going over the nuts and bolts of a show they'll soon perform. Dressed conservatively in jeans, khakis, and tailored shirts, they could be actors preparing for a no-frills production of *The Cherry Orchard*. But then they break into a number from their upcoming show, each taking a distinct melody line of a complex harmonization: "We're Winnie, Rachel, Trix, and Trampolina ..."



And they are. Meet the Kinsey Sicks, who like to be described as "America's favorite dragapella beauty shop quartet." Actually, that's kind of like the Pacific calling itself "California's favorite coastline," but still. Dressed in their full regalia, Winnie et al. -- who make Pamela Anderson look bashful -- are as outrageous and inventive a group of drag queens as you're likely to encounter.

Undoubtedly, though, the Kinseys -- named for the top end of sexologist Alfred Kinsey's scale of sexual orientation -- aren't your average, garden-variety drag queens. For a start, they reject the hallowed tradition of lip-synching, and their "dragapella" contains an obvious basso element. The act itself is an edgy mixture of genres, in which squeaky-clean a cappella meets the exuberance of drag, and camp coexists with a subtle lyricism. For instance, while one moment finds the group performing a deliciously smutty parody of "Fever" ("Beaver"), in the next they might be commemorating a friend who died of an AIDS-related illness (in the hauntingly beautiful "Begoña's Song") or serving up a stirring rendition of "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free."

And so, as a staunch member of their growing fan base, I've come to this rehearsal to decode the multiple levels of sexual and social identity contained within gender illusion -- or perhaps just to have fun. I first saw the group perform on opening night of last year's Jewish Film Festival, and suffice it to say that the pretentious, high-tech Israeli film slated as the evening's main entertainment was overshadowed. I went away humming one of the Kinseys' signature parodies -- a warped, Jewish-mother's version of the Bobby McFerrin hit "Don't Worry, Be Happy":

Here's a little song I wrote

I'm probably going to get a frog in my throat

Don't be happy ... worry.

Our history of worrying is long and proud

For every silver lining, there is a cloud

Don't be happy ... worry.

But this kind of silly fun, done with panache, is only the tip of the Kinsey Sicks iceberg. "I think our show is a really bizarre and delicate balance of stuff -- we bring a lot of trash to the stage, but we do it in intelligent and funny ways," says Irwin Keller, who plays Winnie. The "girls" ' distinctive personalities are a key feature of the show: With her pointy glasses, church hats, and Tupperware fetish, Winnie is just a touch, well, compulsive. Even her anxieties are alphabetized.

The other Sickses bring their own charming idiosyncrasies to the group. There's Trixie, the group's platinum princess, whose daily routine begins with a workout of "eyelash fluttering, lip pursing, and wrinkle management." Young Trampolina sports an impressive beehive and embraces all kinds of alternative spiritualities. And then there's wicked, boy-obsessed Rachel, with her Terilyn Joe-meets-Monica Lewinsky hair, her questionable wardrobe, and her even more questionable sense of personal hygiene. ("Hygiene?" she asks, when I inquire about this. "What is hygiene? I think it's a bourgeois construct.")

### **All work, some play**

All of this -- couture, singing, verbal shtick -- is endlessly refined by the group. In particular, the work involved in producing their tight harmonizations becomes clear during the rehearsal: each note is discussed in the kind of detail that would make Michael Tilson Thomas proud.

After the rehearsal the four oscillate easily between male and

female personas. "We don't fit well into the drag culture -- we tend to parody drag queens as much as anything else," says Ben Schatz, a.k.a. Rachel. "Mixing a male voice with a female body could totally screw with gender illusion, but it doesn't screw with what we're doing, it enhances it."

"Right -- we seem to be in a state of gender limbo," says Keller, who has the wiry, bespectacled look of an earnest graduate student. Of the four, Keller's background is the most musical (his grandmother was an accompanist for silent movies, his father plays sax, and his sister is Diana Ross's bassist), but as with the other Kinseys, music is his avocation. He daylights as the executive director of the AIDS Legal Referral Panel.

While Keller is responsible for arranging the group's songs, much of the lyric writing falls to Schatz, who grew up in what he calls "your basic lefty-intellectual Jewish family -- Mom, Dad, sis, fag." Both parents are writers (his mother authors children's books, while his father has penned such page-turners as *Nigerian Capitalism*), which might account for some of the clever wordplay of Schatz's lyrics ("We put the 'ho' in hosiery, we put the 'chest' in orchestration / We put the 'harm' in harmony, we put the 'sin' in syncopation").

As executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (he quit recently to become the group's business manager) Schatz was responsible for a different kind of writing -- his credits include Clinton's 1992 AIDS policy. "It was frustrating," he says of the administration's ensuing compromises. "But Clinton ran for president of the U.S., not president of Berkeley."

The other two members of the group are similarly multifaceted. Maurice Kelly (Trixie), who knew Schatz at Harvard, works as a project manager for Levi Strauss. Chris Dilley (Trampolina), who took over for longtime member Jerry Friedman this spring, has a degree in communications but is currently temping. "Oh yes, it will be a sad day when I have to give up that job," he jokes when I ask how the Kinseys' success will affect their work lives.

### **Origin story**

Truth be told, it's been a wild ride since July 1994, when the Kinsey Sicks gave their first public concert outside the Muni station at Harvey Milk Plaza. Six months earlier, five friends, including the four original members, had gone to a New Year's Eve Bette Midler concert dressed as the Andrews Sisters, expecting to find themselves among thousands of gay men in drag. To their dismay, they were alone -- but they scored an invitation to sing at a woman's upcoming World War II-themed birthday party.

"We'll come, but we don't sing," Keller remembers saying. On the

way home, though, inspired by Bette, they began working up some numbers. "We thought, 'Hey, we're actually pretty good,' " Schatz says.

Six months later the Kinsey Sicks were born. The name was eventually chosen in preference to "Huh?" ("We wanted audiences to think, 'What the hell just hit us?' " Schatz says.) After filling up Harvey Milk Plaza, the group went on to a whirl of engagements, from small-scale cabarets to full-throttle theatrical runs. Their upcoming show, "Motel Sicks: A Dragapella Summer Vacation," will be the group's sixth at the New Conservatory Theater.

In Kinsey lore, the story is a little different: It began when four vulnerable young girls were taken under the wing of matriarch Mimsey Kinsey, their "dear departed foundress." Tragically, soon after bringing the girls together, Mimsey vanished in a mysterious hiking accident in the Dutch Alps -- but not before passing on to the girls some of her most valued secrets, like "how to power accessorize."

"She was an incredibly glamorous creature," Trixie says. "An alchemist, if you will, considering what she did for us."

Certainly there's no lack of glamour to the Kinseys' ensembles, which are designed by Kelly and meticulously put together by tailor Zilda Lopez. Designed to evoke the girls' individual personalities, the costumes provide "wonderful opportunities for our characters to find themselves," Keller says.

For example, "Rachel would never be seen in anything that didn't look like hell," Schatz says.

Poor Rachel. She is -- how shall we put it -- something of a sexual predator. Though unlucky in love, she remains hopeful. "Honey, I figure that somewhere in the world there has to be someone, or something, willing to have sex with me," she tells me. In fact, she adds, "If any of your readers are interested, tell them there's a free Ginsu knife for anyone who goes on a date with me."

Trixie, the sophisticate, has a slightly more subtle way of reeling men in. "I rely on an unerring sense of priorities -- Men, Money, Music, and Mink," she says. Currently single, she is looking for "a man who can keep me in the kind of Robin Leach, lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous mode to which I'd like to become accustomed."

And Winnie? How did she get to be so fastidious?

"I was a member of a cult -- the Branch Fastidians," she trills. "They brainwashed me, and afterwards I enjoyed how clean my

brain was."

As the foursome's newest member, Trampolina acknowledges that her character is "still somewhat under construction" -- though happy there, since "she just loves those construction workers." Her predecessor was the be-beehived Vaselina (who left for personal reasons), and when Dilley began understudying, Trampy was introduced as Vaselina's "illogical, illegible" daughter. Now that she's a full-fledged member of the group, Schatz says, "we'll be showing how she's always been with us. We might have to do some prequel work, like George Lucas."

Dilley, who at 27 is the baby of the group (the others are in their late 30s or early 40s), is also a relative newcomer to drag. He first met the Kinsey Sicks last summer, when he was performing in *The Ballad of Little Mikey* at the New Conservatory Theater. The Kinseys were on the next-door stage, and the two groups shared a dressing room.

"When I saw the show, heard the singing and how clever the lyrics were, I knew that something really unexplainable was happening here," Dilley says.

"I think you mean unjustifiable," Schatz says.

"Or inexcusable," Kelly adds.

Five months later, on being asked if he'd like to understudy, Dilley's response was a clear "abso-fuckin'-lutely!" He proceeded to learn 60 songs -- with choreography -- in a matter of weeks. "It was a whirlwind. It was insane. It was fabulous," he says.

Of drag, he says, "I love how it allows a different side of my personality to come out. You can access your feminine side, of course, but it's more than that. You just generally free different sides of yourself."

Schatz has a slightly more caustic view of the girls' personalities: "They're basically our therapy issues on stage." When Kelly adds, "Or perhaps who we'd love to be," Schatz rolls his eyes. "Rachel is not who I'd love to be. Rachel is who I'm trying desperately not to be."

### **Kinseys on the beach**

Perhaps during the girls' summer vacation the overheated Rachel will be able to, er, sate her desires. Winnie, of course, will be meeting up with her friends in all the Stuckey's across the country, where she'll continue her search for "the greatest pecan log in America," while Trampy will be practicing her yoga on the beach. As for Trixie, "I've heard that in these tropical islands there are still

some rich sugar barons to be found," she says wistfully. "Maybe there'll be someone who can be sweet to me."

Clearly, though radically different, the girls are, in Trixie's words, "largely as happy as four sorority girls at a slumber party." But their relationships are constantly developing.

"I really think that's one of the reasons people keep coming back to our shows, to see what's new with the girls," Keller says.

Having lately won a batch of prizes in a regional a cappella contest (in addition to Audience Favorite, they were presented with a special prize for Best Legs), the Kinseys are discovering a whole new audience demographic -- breeders. "Straight people like us at least as much as gay folk," Schatz says wonderingly.

It's tempting to imagine that, with this kind of crossover appeal, the Kinseys will soon combat what Kelly calls Hollywood's "extreme and obvious" stereotyping of drag queens in such movies as *The Birdcage* and *To Wong Foo*.

"Actually, we do have an offer pending where the four of us play the manager of a basketball team," Keller says.

In the meantime, the girls are working on their arpeggios and slowly but surely branching out. They've already toured North America and aim to go international soon ("we love being in continents," Keller says). Or, as Rachel modestly puts it: "What the world needs now is me, sweet me." You say it, girl.

**'Motel Sicks: A Dragapella Summer Vacation.'** Previews June 17, 8 p.m. Opens June 18, 8 p.m. Runs June 19-July 10, 8 p.m., New Conservatory Theatre Center, 25 Van Ness, S.F. \$12-\$20. (415) 861-8972.

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