

# dallasvoice

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## Transmission

Live theater (of a sort) returns to North Texas  
with the timely play 'I Am My Own Wife'

by Arnold Wayne Jones, Page 10

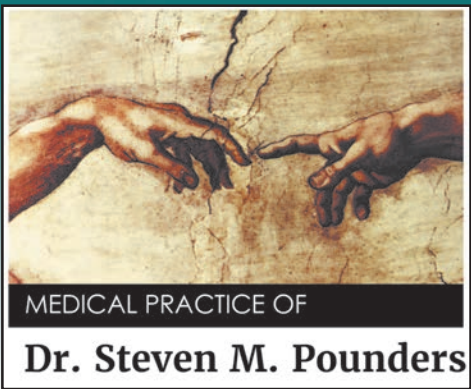


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Bob Hess in 'I Am My Own Wife' Photo by Jason Anderson

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## Suspect arrested in murder of Merci Mack

Dallas Police on Thursday, July 9, announced the arrest of a suspect in the June 30 murder of trans woman Merci Mack. Angelo Walker, 20, has been booked into the Dallas County Jail on a charge of murder. Bond is set at \$900,000.

According to a post on the police department's blog, DPD.beat, "During the course of this investigation, it was determined that Angelo Walker was responsible for the murder of Merci Richey. On July 8, 2020, Angelo Walker was arrested by the North Texas Fugitive Task Force."

### ORIGINAL POST

Family and friends of Merci Mack gathered Saturday, July 4, outside the Reverchon Community Center for a vigil in memory of the Dallas trans woman, who was shot to death in the parking lot of a South Dallas apartment complex on June 30.

Mack's family was joined by community members at the vigil, which was organized with the support of the Nu Transgender Movement as well as the North Texas chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America.

More than 100 people came to pay their respects and show support for the Mack family.

Nu Trans Movement CEO Shannon A. Walker began the vigil by performing a song



Family and friends of Merci Mack gathered for a vigil in her memory July 4th.

that listed the names of 19 trans people killed in the first six months of this year ending with Mack's name.

Mack was the fourth Black trans woman killed during Pride month and the 19th trans person to die violently this year. Three more names have been added to the list since the vigil bringing the 2020 death toll to 22.

— Steven Monacelli

## Sao Paulo Patient 'cured' of HIV

A man in Brazil has apparently been

"cleared" of HIV thanks to "a novel drug strategy designed to flush the AIDS virus out of all of its reservoirs in the body," according to

These results, the magazine notes, makes the Sao Paulo Patient the "proof of principle in humans" for the ARV/B3 combination treatment.

Cohen's article also notes that only two other people are known to have been cured of HIV infections. Timothy Ray Brown and The London Patient both received bone marrow transplants while being treated for cancer, and the transplants "cleared their infections and gave them new immune systems that resist" HIV infection.

There have been other cases in which patients appeared to have been cured, but the virus returned after being gone for a long time.

— Tammye Nash

## Rising together again

"Rise Together," the virtual fundraiser featuring writer/director/actor/activist Del Shores and benefitting the Greg Dollgener Memorial AIDS Fund, returns Wednesday, July 15, from 7-8 p.m., organizers have announced.

The show originally aired June 30 but because of technical issues is being re-aired, this time from Israel Luna's Spayse Studios "to insure all goes well," organizers said.

Rise Together, presented in conjunction with local WNBA team Dallas Wings, will feature live music, performances by entertainers at Metro-Ball 2020, auctions, customized Pride Boxes, prizes and more.

Watch the show streaming live beginning at 7 p.m. on Wednesday at [GDMAF.org/rise](https://GDMAF.org/rise).

— Tammye Nash

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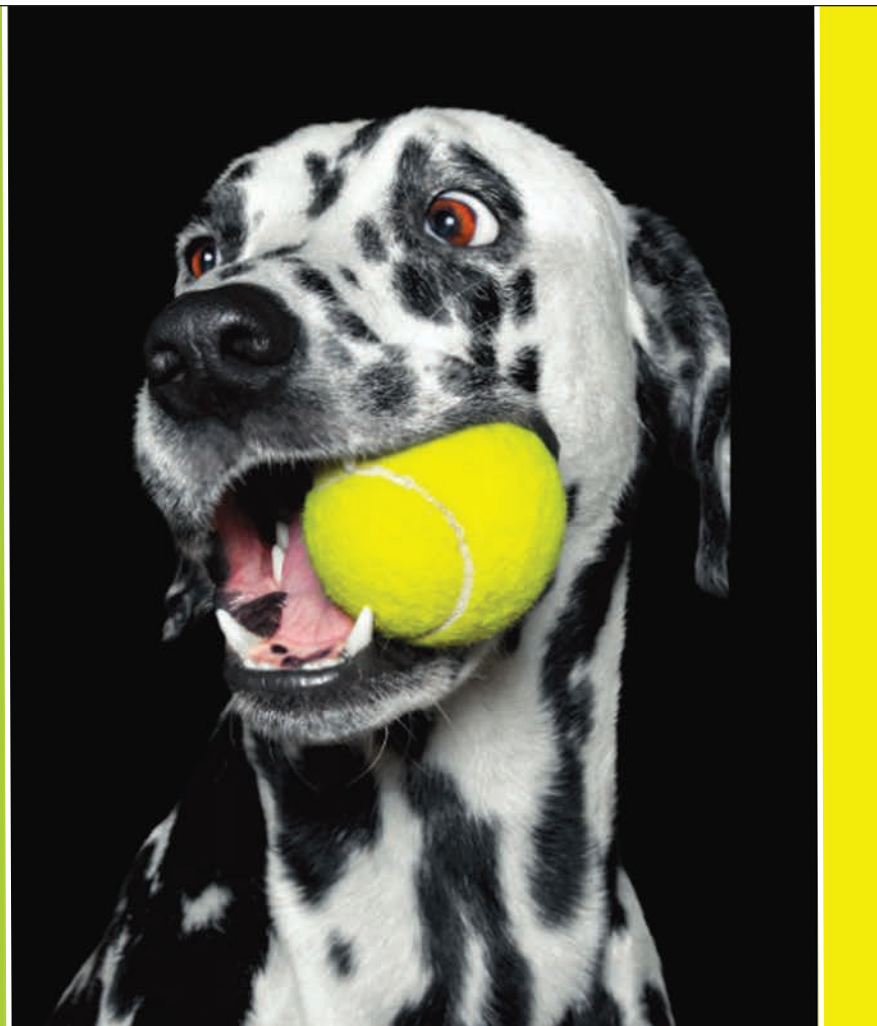
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# 'A whole new world'

The first virtual Dallas Pride is coming together

**TAMMYE NASH** | Managing Editor  
nash@dallasvoice.com

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on Pride celebrations across the county — around the world, really — including the annual Dallas Pride weekend. But not even the coronavirus can stop Pride completely.

Dallas Pride, a weekend full of events that usually includes the Miller Lite Music Festival on Saturday and the Alan Ross Texas Freedom Parade on Sunday, last year moved from its decades-long home (the weekend of the third Sunday in September, in Oak Lawn), to the first weekend in June at Fair Park. Had things gone as planned this year, the festival and parade would have again taken place on the first weekend in June at Fair Park.

But things, quite obviously, have not gone as planned this year — not for Dallas Pride and not, really, for the country as a whole.

The Dallas Pride Committee, led by Executive Director Jaron Turnbow, initially decided to move the celebration from the first weekend in June to the last weekend in July, hoping that the extra several weeks would be enough time for the epidemic to die down and in-person gatherings to once again be safe. That, as we know, hasn't happened.

Rather than dying out, the epidemic, fueled by selfishness and ignorance, has instead gained steam. And that forced the Pride committee to make yet another change: taking the celebration virtual.

But while it allows for a Pride celebration to happen, a virtual event most definitely poses some new and unique challenges for organizers.

"Going virtual is a whole new world," Turnbow said. "But considering the time restraints and the circumstances, it's actually gone quite smoothly.

"The biggest hurdle has been time," he continued. "There are a lot of moving parts for events of this size, not just internally for Pride, but also for the organizations, businesses and sponsors involved. We are all used to in-person events and everything that goes along with planning for that. Getting hundreds of people all on the same page and learning this new virtual world together has been a unique challenge."

Turnbow admitted that, when the committee first decided to take Dallas Pride to the virtual world, "I expected it to be easier, to some extent. But nothing about this has been easier. Had we known back in January what we know now about the pandemic and the course it would take, we could've made the changes earlier and given [ourselves] more time to make the transition."

The coronavirus pandemic, he continued, "has had its little fingers in everything, which has made deadlines far more difficult than I, or any of us, imagined. Having said this, it has been quite fun to learn new things in the course of going virtual. It will be exciting to carry some of these new things into 2021."

## The grand marshals

Traditionally, potential grand marshals for Dallas Pride are nominated by community members, then the Pride committee puts nominees to a vote by the community, with the top two vote-getters named as grand marshals. But because "this year has not gone as planned," Turnbow said, "and time has not been on our side," the top six nominees are all being named as grand marshals of Pride 2020.

They are: Dallas City Council member Adam Medrano, Kristi Wilson with Andrews Distributing, Danny Cabrera AKA Liquor Mini, longtime activist and fundraising couple Linze Serrel and Sable Alexander (Bill Lindsey and Michael Champion), legendary drag performer and Dallas Voice columnist Cassie Nova and Greg Dollgener Memorial AIDS



Jason Turnbow

Fund founder David Hearn.

## The weekend lineup

On Saturday, July 25, Ron Corning will host #DallasPrideLivestream with entertainment provided by local musicians, bands, celebrity cameos in the afternoon and DJs later in the evening. The shows will stream online at DallasPride.org, on Facebook Live and on YouTube.

The show beginning at 2 p.m. will feature Big Freedia, David Hernandez, Kristine W., Rayvon Owen, Ty Herndon, Brody Ray, Crisdee and Adrian Lea of The Primadonna. The DJs' livestream kicks off at 9 p.m. and will feature Dorian Electric and DJ Deanne.

On Sunday, July 26, #DallasPrideDragBrunch, hosted by 2019 co-Grand Marshal Marsha Dimes, will stream online from 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. The show will give viewers a chance to donate, with all proceeds going to this year's Dallas Pride beneficiary organizations: Coalition for Aging LGBT, AIDS Services of Dallas, Equality Texas, TGRA, the Miss Gay Texas Pageant System and the United Court of the Lone Star Empire.

After the Drag Brunch show is done, it's parade time. Only this year, instead of an actual parade down Cedar Springs or through Fair Park, organizers want LGBTQ Dallasites and their allies to take Pride to the ALL the streets of Dallas.

"We are encouraging everyone to dress up in their favorite pride outfits, decorate their vehicles and parade around town," Turnbow said. "Be visible — whether you are going to work, shopping or just out for a Sunday drive. Be visible, like people are doing for graduations and birthdays — a reverse parade!"

## The CW33 partnership

In 2019, local TV station CW33 sent a team to Fair Park to broadcast the Alan Ross Texas Freedom Parade live. This year, even before the pandemic hit, parade organizers were working with the TV station to expand and improve CW33's participation in Pride 2020.

CW33 began last month airing "Profiles in Pride," a series of segments included on the station's new show, Morning After, as well as a series of custom-created 30-second vignettes that ran throughout June Pride Month.

CW33's participation in Pride continues this month, with Ron Corning and Jenny Anchondo hosting The Pride of Texas, a 30-minute special featuring highlights from previous Alan Ross Texas Freedom Parades, interviews and the Profiles in Pride segments.

## July and beyond

This year, Pride won't end on "parade Sunday." Instead, the #DallasPrideSpotlight will continue through November.

The #DallasPrideSpotlight series, airing on the Dallas Pride social media channels, will turn the focus on festival vendors, parade entries, grand marshals and beneficiary organizations. The series will also include #CookingWithPride, hosted by local LGBTQ chefs and offering up "delicious recipes to try at home," #DallasDragItUp tutorials with local drag queens and kings, #DallasTeenPride with Real Live Connections and #DallasFamilyPride with Rainbow Roundup focused on LGBTQ families in DFW.

And finally, this fall Dallas Pride and Friends of Fair Park will join together to sponsor #DallasRainbowRun, with participating runners being given a shirt and a race medal to "dress with Pride" when they run. Watch for more details on the run, coming soon.

"This year is not what anyone expected," Turnbow said of Dallas Pride 2020 and how it is playing out. "We've all had to take the circumstances presented to us and make the best of it.

"When stress is at an all-time high for most of humanity, we need to remember to be kind, be caring and be understanding of one another," he continued. "For Dallas Pride, we are excited to learn new skills, try some new things for 2020 and look forward to in-person events and new approaches for 2021."



# Supporting BLM? Show your receipts

ACE ROBINSON | Positive Thoughts

**N**ext year, it will have been 40 years since the world became aware of AIDS and its ability to wreak havoc throughout humankind.

We learned quickly that HIV did not discriminate in how aggressively it would impact an individual. But shortly thereafter, we learned that HIV did discriminate in how aggressively it would impact a community.

In response to the AIDS crisis, storied advocates mobilized and created systems and structures to save their lives and the lives of those that they loved. Then came the birth of HIV service organizations. Many of those organizations have undeniable legacies of serving people living with HIV at a time when countless clinicians refused to even touch them. The advocates pushed, kicked, screamed and shoved until the powers-that-be began to respond. And when public health officials responded in lackluster fashion, these public health heroes pushed even harder.

Decades later, numerous books, movies and even plays have been produced highlighting the work done by this collection of individuals who would eventually come to lead or choose the leaders of HSOs. I, like many of my colleagues, have read or seen nearly all of these productions in one form or another. And one thing is clear to me in these biographic pieces: Almost no one looks like me.

Black people are often a footnote in the history of the AIDS movement. One of the first suspected cases of AIDS was in a Black teenager named Robert Rayford from St. Louis, Missouri, who died of what seemingly were HIV-related causes at the age of 16 in 1969 — i.e., Kaposi's sarcoma, pneumonia and an advanced chlamydia infection. Twelve years later, Michael Gottlieb, M.D., was one of the leading authors of a seminal *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* detailing

the symptoms of five white gay men living with pneumocystis pneumonia in 1981. His report led to the beginning of the world's awareness of HIV.

But there were two major omissions in that report: two more documented cases of Black men — one gay, and one a heterosexual Haitian. Thinking back, Gottlieb shared, "I wouldn't have thought it mattered. But in retrospect, I think it might've made a difference among gay Black men."

The misconception that HIV was a white gay man's disease started from the very beginning.

Today in America, Black gay, bisexual and same-gender-loving adolescent boys and men are the most HIV-impacted population by scope and scale, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What does that mean within the Black gay community? It means the HIV response in America has utterly failed this population.

There is daily proof of the failure of HIV Inc. to service Black gay men. Go into an HIV clinic in most parts of America, and you will see a disproportionate number of Black gay, bisexual, and same-gender-loving men sitting in the waiting room. These are the same people who typically do not see themselves in HIV prevention messaging, on the Gay Pride billboards across America every June or sitting across from themselves while in the doctor's offices.

Black gay men do see themselves on the front page of newspapers being charged under HIV criminalization statutes or on CDC reports stating once again that they make up the highest number of new HIV infections in the country.

Due to overwhelming stigma, prejudice and systemic racism and homophobia, Black gay men living with and/or impacted by HIV have hurdle after hurdle to overcome. Unfortunately, they are not always successful due to all the obvious reasons:

They fall out of care (racist doctors). They don't trust treatment options (racist researchers). They don't trust HIV service organizations (racist hiring practices). All of these realities are simply un-



Ace Robinson (Photo by Terri Wilder)

acceptable.

Tyler TerMeer, PhD, M.S., CEO of Cascade AIDS Project, says, "If we are truly committed to a tomorrow that values all Black and brown lives and one that improves the lived experience of our Black, Indigenous and people of color clients and community through health equity and racial justice, then our organizations need to make investments in Black leadership."

## Black gay lives matter

For decades, fingers constantly pointed at Black men living with HIV, stating that they were to blame for the systems in which they acquired, progressed and sometimes died from the virus. Many Black people have been repeatedly admonished for not utilizing available resources to prevent and/or treat HIV.

Thankfully, those days of victim-blaming are coming to an end, albeit way too late for way too many.

Those storied HIV organizations that have existed for over three decades have been successful at turning the epidemic around — for white gay men. But they have historically failed Black people. Larry Scott-Walker, co-founder and executive director of THRIVE SS, says "When Black gay men are not included in the C-suite, the efforts of an organization lack the cultural reflection and responsiveness required to adequately address the needs of Black people and ultimately end up doing more harm than good in these vital communities."

Changing the system is easier said than done. The best-funded HIV service organizations have two things in common: 1. their C-suites lack Black gay men or even Black people of any gender identity or sexuality, and 2. due to their white

leadership structure, they have increased access to capital.

You will often see Black gay men tokenized at these same organizations to serve as outreach specialists or program managers for services exclusively focused on Black people or other racial and ethnic minorities. As one executive director, who asked to remain anonymous, shared, "Most HIV organizations only want Black people as their building's decoration and not as the support beams."

Within Black communities, certain organizations are very well-known for their anti-Black hiring practices, work culture and subsequent abysmal treatment of clientele. Black people who work in HIV at all levels have stories of real harm that's occurred. Black employees are often made to keep quiet about these issues for fear of being seen as a troublemaker and "hard to work with" and, therefore, become unable to work anywhere in the field.

Livelihoods have been destroyed, and some talented and committed people have left the field altogether. Some of the offending agencies have even had Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaints filed against them, and the findings have landed on their desk.

Without fail, the same routine follows those findings:

- An external consultant trained in race humility comes to the organization.
- The remaining Black staff are interviewed.
- An airing of grievances about the agency's systemic racism occurs.
- A final report of suggested activities to address diversity and inclusion is created.

Typically, a Black woman is hired as the human resources director of diversity and inclusion.

Fast forward to one year later, those same organizations still lack any Black people in executive leadership; the director of diversity and inclusion has resigned, and disgruntled Black staff and clientele hope for a better day.

"Black gay men must be in the C-suite to remove the cloak of invisibility," says Stephen Lee, M.D., M.B.A., executive director of NASTAD. "HIV organizations that live their values aggressively also recruit and support minorities and LGBTQ

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# New foundation funds recovery

Maripoza Foundation helps HIV-positive patients with substance abuse treatment

DAVID TAFFET | Senior Staff Writer  
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**T**he disease of addiction is rooted in shame," said Mesh Tandon, executive director of the Maripoza Foundation. The new Dallas-based

Maripoza Foundation offers substance abuse and chemical sex treatment, intervention and prevention services to those who are HIV-positive.

More than half of new HIV transmission takes place when people are under the influence, Tandon explained. Injection drug use is a contributing factor in 20 percent of all HIV cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Alcohol and drugs affect a person's judgment and increase the risk of contracting HIV.

A quarter of people with HIV are in need of substance abuse treatment. But receiving treatment for chemical dependency is out of reach for many.

Maripoza provides the financial assistance necessary to help those in need of residential treatment. Although locally based, the organization serves people nationally.

Tandon explained that his organization isn't trying to reinvent drug treatment. Other organizations provide the actual services; Maripoza just helps individuals access those services. For out-patient treatment, his organization works with Legacy Counseling Center and with Resource Center.

In the U.S., there are no in-patient chemical dependency facilities for people with HIV. But Maripoza has screened facilities that have experience working with people who are HIV-positive and that understand the LGBTQ community and will focus on the particular issues that concern people with HIV and LGBTQ people.

After a patient applies for assistance through the organization's website and is accepted, the clinical director devises a plan for the patient. The in-patient cur-



Mesh Tandon

riculum includes a discussion of LGBTQ issues such as coming out, acceptance and sexual behaviors.

"The goal is to identify bottom-line behaviors, build self-worth and identify what safe behaviors are," Tandon said. The plan might include abstinence for a short period. If a couple is going through treatment, separate treatment plans are created.

During the pandemic and this period of isolation, more people are reaching out for help with addiction, Tandon said. While people are out of work is a good time for them to seek treatment. If entering a facility is part of the treatment, an employer is less likely to know that employee was seeking treatment.

"A wandering mind is a dangerous mind," Tandon suggested. With a lot of time on everyone's hands while waiting out lockdowns and periods of isolation, substance abuse is apparently increasing, and the need for treatment among people in the community has increased.

"More people are reaching out," Tandon said. "And recovery meetings are not available."

Through the pandemic, elective procedures have been curtailed. Even dental practices have been closed. But treatment centers are operating.

Working with counselors helps patients in recovery.

"There is relapse," Tandon said. "That's part of many people's stories. Sometimes you need to have a breakdown to have a breakthrough."

Tandon said that for many people to have that breakthrough, something needs to happen to make them realize how much they can lose very quickly. That may include "loss of a job, a partner or an arrest — an array of consequences."

That's when Maripoza is most effective, helping a client get into treatment and create a plan that extends beyond a year. In-patient treatment is followed by counseling that is monitored by one of Maripoza's case managers.

Substance abuse disorders affect more than 20 percent of the LGBTQ population compared to about 9 percent of the population in general. Fortunately, the LGBTQ population tends to seek treatment at a higher rate than the general population. And LGBTQ people respond to treatment sensitive to their needs. ■

*Assistance from Maripoza is granted based on an individual's needs and the foundation's available funds. To apply for assistance or to donate to help others seek treatment, visit [Maripoza.org](http://Maripoza.org).*



## RECEIPTS

From Previous Page

leaders to make our communities and workplaces stronger, more creative and resilient.

"They actively create seats at the leadership table for difference, innovative solutions, and diverse perspectives. Without this, they are doomed to a culture that stifles different viewpoints and voices," Lee said.

Successful HIV service organizations that are doing the necessary work to support the communities disproportionately impacted by HIV have been able to create an equitable business model, starting with their board of directors and going through the executive team and their staff. Through intentional design, HIV service organizations such as TruEvolution in Southern California have been able to sustainably engage the very "hard-to-reach popula-

tions" that other agencies have failed to support.

"As the world becomes more complicated and health disparities layer themselves deeper in our culture and community, Black gay men are the critical resources to the leadership of the HIV movement," says Gabriel Maldonado, M.B.A., CEO of TruEvolution. "Our roles are to not only implement programs and execute services, but to stay connected to the community and generate solutions that speak to the culture, history, and language of the people we serve.

"As embedded and trusted community members, we are best able to address our interwoven and unmet cultural needs."

In reference to the rhetoric about Black same-gender-loving men, David Malebranche, M.D., M.P.H., once famously

stated a general response to white HIV researchers and administrators: "They are not a hard-to-reach population just because you do not know how to reach them."

At this exact moment in the story of America, we are seeing non-Black people pay more attention to the systems that have endangered the lives of Black men from a variety of angles. In response, we are seeing many industries, including the field of HIV, begin to do a deeper level of self-reflection on their role in perpetuating a world that sees Black men die earlier and with less support than their peers.

And we are also seeing numerous HIV-focused agencies releasing #BlackLivesMatter statements.

But let's be clear: The Black community does not want hollow words written

on the screen.

The community wants to see the receipts. We want to see who is sitting on your board of directors and who is sitting in your C-suites. If those people do not look like the epidemic in your community, change must come. And come now. ■

*Ace Robinson is a leading HIV advocate and population health expert residing in Los Angeles. He is a board director of the Awielle Foundation, which combats violence through brain health research, and is a co-chair of the LA County HIV Commission's Standards & Best Practices Committee. This column is a project of TheBody, Plus, Positively Aware, POZ and Q Syndicate, the LGBT wire service. Visit their websites — [TheBody.com](http://TheBody.com), [HIVPlusMag.com](http://HIVPlusMag.com), [PositivelyAware.com](http://PositivelyAware.com) and [Poz.com](http://Poz.com) — for the latest updates on HIV/AIDS.*



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## So long Mayor Chambers — finally

I am thinking of changing the title of this column to “Dispatches from Hell,” because I truly feel like every week is just another barrage of awful news stories, most of them with Trump at the center. And SO MANY PEOPLE ARE DYING! And the Trump Administration’s current messaging on COVID-19, even as some states are rapidly reaching peak levels, is, “Let’s be more racist.”

I did, though, want to give a shout-out to the brave woman in Arizona who ransacked a mask display at her local Target and filmed it all to inspire us all. And I am definitely inspired — inspired to declare that anti-maskers are the fucking worst.

It’s been a while since I did a meat-and-potatoes “Creep” column because of the country being on fire and all. So this week, I decided that it had to be about someone other than Trump (though his racist Fourth of July rant at Mount Rushmore was prime “Creep” material).

And so this week, I give you Mark Chambers, former mayor of Carbon Hill, Ala.

On Facebook, where bad ideas go to thrive, Chambers posted, “We live in a society where homosexuals lecture us on morals, transvestites lecture us on human biology, baby killers lecture us on human rights and socialists lecture us on economics.”

A Facebook friend commented that they feared for the country their grandkids would live in and that it would “take a revolution” to change things.

Chambers’ response was to call for murder: “The only way to change it would be to kill the problem out. I know it’s bad to say, but without killing them



D'Anne Witkowski  
Creep of the Week

out, there’s no way to fix it.”

Aww, he knew it was bad to say. And yet, he still said it. Actually, he didn’t just say it. He typed it out and then de-

cided to post it to a very public platform.

According to The Advocate, Chambers told WBRC FOX6, “I never said anything about killing out gays or anything like that.”

But when the reporter read his own words to him he said, “That’s in a revolution. That’s right! If it comes to a revolution in this country, both sides of these people will be killed out.”

Oh, he just meant kill gays in a revolution. Got it. Totally OK then. Carry on.

And so people called for Chambers to resign, and he did. The end.

Ha-ha! Just kidding! He posted the “kill the problem” comment more than a year ago. And he’s remained the mayor ever since.

Until now.

Violent homophobia and virulent racism go hand-in-hand, and Chambers just found himself in the center of that very tight Venn diagram.

The University of Alabama football team, the Crimson Tide (who are not, sadly “the fighting tampons” — truly a missed opportunity), posted a video on June 25 that featured players and coach speaking against racism that ended

with the refrain, “All lives can’t matter until Black lives matter.” Well, with that, Chambers had finally had enough. He posted on Facebook that he was getting rid of University of Alabama football memorabilia.

“Their sorry-ass political views is why their [sic] getting out of my house,” he posted, followed by, “When you put Black lives before all lives they can kiss my ass.”

This brave stand was followed soon after by a one-line resignation letter reading, “I quit the job of mayor effective June 27 at 4:30 p.m.”

Good riddance.

Carbon Hill, Ala., has been through some shit lately. In April, a tornado tore up their town. In March, the body of a city council member’s wife was found in a creek (Spoiler alert: The husband did it). So, frankly, getting rid of an openly homophobic and racist mayor is actually a little bit of light in an otherwise dark few months.

Stepping in to replace Chambers is April Kennedy Herron, a white woman and the city’s first woman mayor. Regarding Chambers’s comments, Herron told Daily Mountain Eagle, “Everybody has the right to their opinion, but nobody is free of consequences. That’s just how it is. I don’t share those views, never have. I wasn’t raised that way.”

Then the Daily Mountain Eagle asked if Carbon Hill was “racially divided.”

“I’ve never realized it,” she said. “It wasn’t this or that, or his and hers, or mine and theirs, or Black and white. It was just Carbon Hill.”

She ended her comment with, “I hope not.”

Considering the mayor she’s replaced, who was in office since 2014, was ousted for being a racist I’d say Carbon Hill, like the rest of America, is going to need more than hope. I wish her the best. ■

*D’Anne Witkowski is a poet, writer and comedian living in Michigan with her wife and son. She has been writing about LGBT politics for over a decade. Follow her on Twitter @MamaDWitkowski.*



# I am my own mystery



Bob Hess, above, returns to North Texas stages — albeit without a live audience — in the acclaimed play ‘I Am My Own Wife’ by Dallas native Doug Wright, opposite. (Production photo courtesy Jason Anderson)

A new production of a play about a trans woman — and possible Nazi collaborator — could not be more timely... or unexpected

**ARNOLD WAYNE JONES** | Executive Editor  
jones@dallasvoice.com

At a time when live theater is basically a thing of the past, Bob Hess seems to be one of the few local stage actors who has stayed busy and visible. He was appearing in Stage West’s production of *The Children* just as the pandemic hit, but the theater was able to film it before the lockdown and release a video of the production online. He was set to follow that up with a solo show at WaterTower Theatre originally in May; that was bumped to July, before being canceled altogether... only not. Like *The Children*, Hess was able to film *I Am My Own Wife* onstage, making him

perhaps the only actor in North Texas to present *two* shows in the time of COVID and be able to stream them both.

“Yeah, they were back-to-back,” Hess nods. “*The Children* was the last Actors Equity show [presented] in DFW. If it had happened later, though, I wouldn’t have done it — the unique reason I’m able to do [*I Am My Own Wife*] is that I am the only actor.”

Fortunate, it is then, that Hess is experienced in stage *and* screen work, separate skill sets he brings to bear in this new production.

“[Director Ashley Puckett Gonzales] said she didn’t want this to look like a film version; she wanted us to [sense] the theatricality. That made a profound difference” in his approach, Hess says. “I tended to do it as rehearsed as a theater show, but when the cameras came in closer for tighter shots, I *did* count on the lessons I have learned as an on-camera actor. I think stillness is very powerful on camera. You throw your intensity into the frame.”

“I feel an unusual responsibility to this production because it’s in my hometown,” says Doug Wright, the Dallas native who wrote the play and became a personal friend of the central character during the process. “I’m glad how responsible WaterTower is being about producing it [for filming].”

It was just as important that the show be respectful toward the cast and crew, an experience in the post-pandemic world that Hess found eye-opening. “Even in shooting the play, people were very far away from me — precautions that really made you aware of how many people are involved in a theater project or a film. If the hem came loose on the costume, they would provide me with a needle and thread and I’d have to fix it myself!”

Doing it without an audience, however, did have repercussions on the work as a piece of theater.

“Whenever you do a play, you hit a point where someone says, ‘You need an audience,’” Hess explains. “*The Children*

had a run in front of an audience, but I never had the benefit of that with *I Am My Own Wife*. The metronome alters [based on the audience reaction]. Things I would have had to do in the live performance I don’t have to do, like holding for a laugh or reading the change in the audience. That was disappointing. And it surprised me how much humor there is, especially late in the script. The character of Charlotte charms the audience just as she charmed Doug [in real life].” (He did get a sense for it during tech rehearsals, when the film crew reacted to the performance — a whisper perhaps of what a packed house might give, but useful nonetheless.)

Hess is just happy he was able to do *I Am My Own Wife* in the first place. “I’m excited to see how it translates to the medium because I think it’s a beautiful piece of theater. I’ve been working on it since last October, and my appreciation for it has increased 10-fold. Many times in rehearsal, and even while learning the lines, I became overwhelmed by how



profound it was in light of our current culture.”

That’s partly because *I Am My Own Wife* — one of the most acclaimed American plays of the 21st century, winner of the Tony and the Pulitzer — deals variously with trans lives, victimization, world history and even cancel culture. It centers on Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an antiquarian whose Berlin museum preserved many household items of 19th century Germany, and who survived the Nazi regime, known for its persecution of the LGBTQ community, despite being a trans woman. Just how she was able to survive it is one of the play’s abiding mysteries: Was she a Nazi collaborator? And if so, how does — how should — that impact our understanding of her? That’s one

of the things that makes her, as a real person and a dramatic avatar, “simultaneously heroic and deeply problematic,” according to Wright.

“Here she was: Running a secret gay clearinghouse in her basement where young gay men on the brink of suicide could go for shelter and a kind ear. And she was preserving rare music machines of the past, while living as a biological male [presenting] as female. If I was in that position when the Stasi came knocking on the door, I don’t know what I would do,” Wright says.

From Hess’ perspective, the “truth” of her conduct isn’t a question that, as an actor, he chooses to confront. “I never pondered what do I think actually happened with Charlotte. As an actor I could have said, ‘What does this mean?’ but I didn’t go there. Doug had an interview with Charlotte where he asked her what do you do when the things in your museum become old or worn, and she said, ‘You have to show everything.’ So he gives the audience the same amount of information he has, and leaves them with the same [ambiguities]. I think it’s actually important that the actor remain particularly nebulous about [what she did or did not do], because that is the play — someone [in the audience] shouldn’t be able to tell [solely from my performance] whether I was for sure that she was a Stasi collaborator. You don’t know what’s reliable. If I impose a



position, then I’m lying. The uncertainty [is the point].”

In the context of 2020, though, does it change our opinion of Charlotte if we suspect her of foul deeds? Wright pauses.

“For a culture that’s been systematically denied its own history, she is both a necessary and instructive figure because she shows us we have powerful antecedents in the culture and illustrates the incredible sacrifices people have made to preserve their own sexual and gender identity,” he says.

Part of Hess’ job is to convey the conundrum of those circumstances through his performance — something that, again with the hindsight of the present day, is more resonant than ever.

“The play is full of so many things about the perspective of a trans [person] that touch my heart. From my conversations with my trans friends, I know that there’s no cookie-cutter version of the trans experience — everyone’s is unique. But gay and trans people all have this moment of ‘I am not alone being this way,’ and we see that in the play,” Hess says, choking back emotion. “It’s terribly, terribly moving.”

Which does raise a separate issue relevant today: The issue of casting. Hess is gay, though not trans himself. That could spark concern about inclusion.

■ MYSTERY Next Page

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**BOOK REVIEW: *Confessions of a Gay Priest* by Tom Rastrelli (University of Iowa Press 2020) \$19.95; 328 pp.**

Though he'd always known that he liked boys, little Tommy Rastrelli pretended the opposite when he was in grade school because all good Catholics got married. His family was devout, and Rastrelli never questioned God's love — not even after he was repeatedly molested by a doctor in his Iowa hometown.

For several reasons, he never told his parents about the abuse, enduring it for years until he'd convinced them that he was too old for a pediatrician. That God hadn't saved him from a predator made Rastrelli slowly lose his faith ... and his self-respect. He stopped attending Mass and began questioning the Church's teachings. But then God called a shocked Tom Rastrelli to the priesthood.

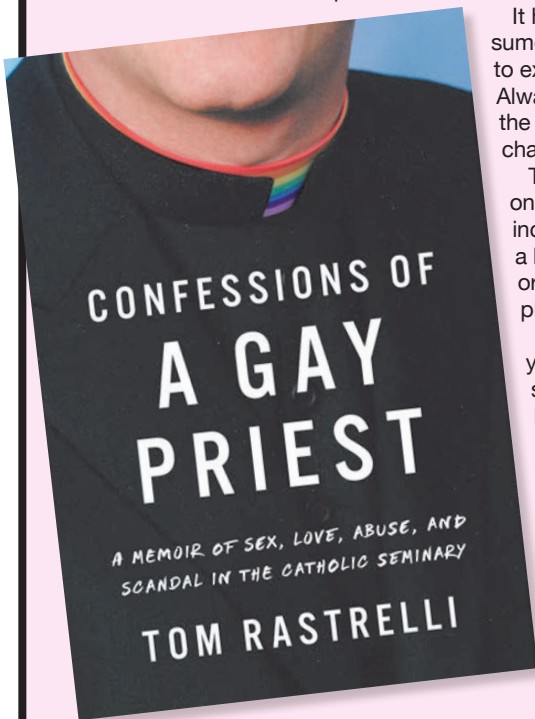
It happened while he was at college, and the whole idea quickly consumed him. Gone was the plan to major in theater; instead, Rastrelli began to explore a world steeped in mystery and ritual but overlaid with fear. Always believing that testimony against the doctor could save others from the same abuse, he took legal action, knowing that scandal could ruin his chance to attend seminary.

There were many things undiscussable, in fact, and the court case was only half of it. As he progressed in his journey to ordination, the secrets included priestly kisses, caresses and soft lies that a backrub was "just" a backrub. At nearly every gathering, Rastrelli was approached for sex or touched inappropriately, led to believe that celibacy had wiggle-room, plied with alcohol or favors while having to deal with it alone.

*Confessions of a Gay Priest* is a hard, hard book to read — it'll make you squirm; it'll make your eyebrows raise; you'll want to toss it on the street and let semis run it over. And yet, it's stay-up-all-night compelling. Beginning with his ordination (so you know don't know the end of the story), Rastrelli tells a tale that will further shock Catholics already reeling from church-related scandals. Rastrelli is sometimes extremely graphic, both in the bedroom and in his various emotional states. He doesn't pull back the curtains on his experiences, he rips them down and burns them. He used pseudonyms but tells details before softening his harshness with beautiful language, strong faith and poetic distractions that play with a reader's sympathy.

You can't beat a book like that, though its graphic nature needs to again be underscored. For a reader who can endure endless queasiness, *Confessions of a Gay Priest* is worth deep examination.

— Terri Schlichenmeyer



■ **MYSTERY** From Previous Page

But Wright — who as author has final say over casting decisions — allays some of those qualms.

"It's only in the last few years, with the welcome activism of the trans community, that people have scrutinized the casting of the play," he says. "I've consented to casting gay males, straight males, trans actors. But Charlotte is only one of 37 roles [performed in the play], and finding an actor with the emotional craft and fluidity to them all is key. So I take my cues from Charlotte, who said, 'I'm a female spirit in a male body, and to me, there's nothing wrong with that.' Charlotte's heart was so big she embraced anyone who was different. I don't want to limit that." (Hess himself says he had no misgivings about taking on the play, though he says casting is a sensitive matter that is properly "a conversation" the theater community should have.)

The primary concern of any theater should, of course, be to tell a story truthfully and well, especially one as rich and complicated as the life of Charlotte, who didn't live long enough to see the play.

"It was a kind of liberation that she died before she could see it," Wright says, "but I like to hope that she would see the play as the love letter it was intended to be. Any moral compromises she made were as a sexually marginalized person with an instinct to survive as her truest self," and you have to admire that, whatever decade it happens.

*I Am My Own Wife* streams July 16–Aug. 2. \$38. Tickets for purchase at [WaterTowerTheatre.org](http://WaterTowerTheatre.org).

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From a celebration of great music to human rights for the strangest among us to polyamory, a diverse slate of online options awaits you this week.



**Hershey Felder: Beethoven, Live from Florence.** Dallas Summer Musicals hasn't been able to present any live events since the lockdown... until this weekend. That's when it will be one of a selection of U.S. arts organizations able to livestream this "play with music" from author-performer Hershey Felder, who brings the great composer and his music to life. Tickets are \$55 per household (with 72 hours of re-stream privileges) and proceeds benefit DSM's educational and outreach programs. *July 12 at 7 p.m. DallasSummerMusicals.org.*



**The True History of the Tragic Life and Triumphant Death of Julia Pastrana, the Ugliest Woman in the World.** This mouthful play — about a famous 19th century "circus freak" referred to as a "baboon lady" — is presented, when performed live in a theater, in total darkness. So what a useful way to mount theater during quarantine: Streaming a wholly auditory experience into your home (in an immersive way, if you wear headphones). This real-life cautionary tale that touches on human rights is timely, and Amphibian Stage Productions revives its acclaimed 2012 version in streamable form. *July 16–30. \$13. AmphibianStage.com.*

**Trigonometry.** A London couple, trying to make ends meet and keep their large and pricy flat, takes in a roommate, and what starts as a space-sharing arrangement grows into a full-on throuple. All eight episodes of this BBC series about polyamory are now available for streaming on HBO Max.



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# Girl on girls

Jenny Block reflects: Is 50 old?

I turn 50 this month. Fifty. When I was a kid, I thought 50 was so old. Fifty-year-olds are grandparents. They go to more funerals than weddings. They go to bed early and get up even earlier. Right? Hell, when I was 40 I thought 50 was old. And now here I am, and I can't help but wonder: Am I old?

I know. I know. I sound like Carrie Bradshaw. But I'm serious. I'm sitting here contemplating not just where I am and where I've been and where I'm going but also what I'm wearing and the color of my hair and the ways I choose to spend my time and who I spend that time with.

I've got some grey that my devoted hairdresser creatively blends with sun-kissed Texas blonde. I wear a lot of above-the-knee dresses with sneakers and flats. And I don poofy Cinderella gowns when I go black tie.

My study is full of unicorns, both because I love them (my new book does have the word unicorn in the title, after all). I baby-talk to my chi-weenie puppy and live for doing crafts with my favorite 6-year-old twins, the daughters of my BFF.

And — stay with me here — I have recently become obsessed with playing *Animal Crossing New Horizons* on my Nintendo Switch Lite. I do it with my (adult) daughter, who is quarantined three-and-a-half hours away from me with her dad. I love playing it. I love talking to her about it. I love how I can disappear into it even just for a little while.

In fact, I love all of the above. I love who I have become. And yet I am always seeing these magazine articles about "what not to wear over 50." I hear chatter about women "making fools of themselves" by not acting their ages. I wonder if my hair is too long or if my unicorns are too many in number or if Nintendo should be replaced with, I don't know... needlepoint?

And then I remember: I don't care. I mean *mostly* I don't care. And I shouldn't. It's not really anyone else's business what I choose to wear or how I choose to spend my time regardless of what year I may have been born in.

I know I'm having a particularly hard time because of the state of the world right now. There won't be any big soiree as planned. There has been no book tour as planned. There is no summer as usual hosting friends and family in our lakeside home. It's like the whole world is stopped, and yet, the clock ticks on.

It makes me think about how I'm using my time. It makes me think about how I would feel about how I used my time if the world were to right itself tomorrow. It makes me think about the pressure we put on ourselves and one another about how we conduct ourselves based on biological age.

Age is a funny thing, really. I know people in their 20s who are far more mature and intelligent and worldly than people who I



know in their 50s and beyond. I have friends who are closer in age to my daughter than to me, and yet, I would count them among my closest friends. I can relate to them far better than I can relate to a lot people who are a *lot* closer to my age.

So am I young for my age? Are they old for theirs? Is there such a thing as a soul

age? Does chronological age mean very little, and what really matters is who we are at our core? I don't know honestly. And I'm not sure it really matters. What I do know is that feeling at peace is the best sign that we're doing what is right for us at any age.

If we go out wearing something that we are constantly tugging and pulling at, or that

we are worried will raise eyebrows in an unwanted way, then we shouldn't wear it. If we are spending our time doing something that we question more than we enjoy, then we should stop doing it. If we are hanging out with people who don't make us feel whole, who don't feel relatable, who require "work" in order to spend time with, then we should stop spending time with them.

I don't think it's that age doesn't *matter*. More time on the planet does allow us more time and space to experience things. But it doesn't mean that we actually take advantage of that time and bother to learn and grow and experience. And someone quite young might be able to see and do far more than their age suggests. You never know.

My wife says I'm an intellectual snob. I confess, I don't have much tolerance for ignorance. If you can't see past your own nose, if you think the world is flat, if you believe that having less melanin in your skin or having a penis or worshipping a certain diety makes you better than someone else, you can count me out. That's not about age. That stuff is about not using your brain.

I'm drawn to things that use my brain and that excite my brain and to people who use theirs. That's not about age. That about having parents who taught me to let the world in and to use critical thinking and facts and science to analyze rather than simply accept — anyone or anything.

So, we come back to the question: Is 50 old? Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I have been on this planet for five decades, and I hope I have used those years well. I will do my best to use whatever years I have left well, and I will continue to surround myself with the peoples and activities that make my brain buzz, because age doesn't matter but being aware of ourselves and of the world around us does.

Jenny Block is the author of *Be That Unicorn* (available on Amazon). Send comments or questions to her at [GirlOnGirls@gmail.com](mailto:GirlOnGirls@gmail.com).

this week's solution

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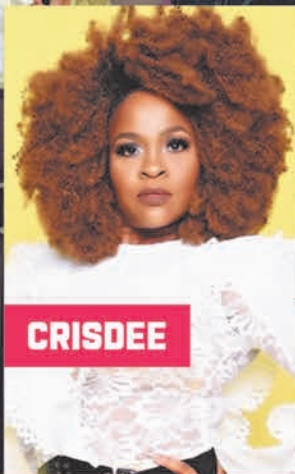
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## Sisters at Legacy



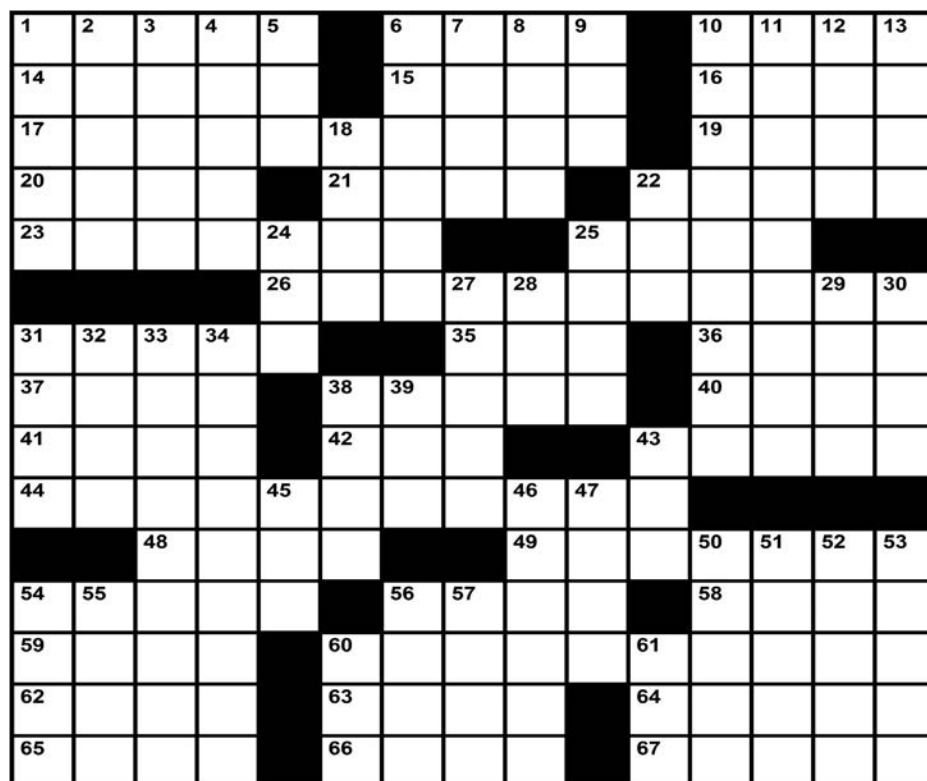
Sister Ginger Neutral, Novice Ty Dai, Johnathon DeJarnett-Wallace, Novice Mel Atonin, Novice Shanita Lay, Hal Wallace III, Charlie, and a Postulant



Novice Shanita Lay

## q-puzzle

# Everybody Loves Raymond Burr



Solution on Page 14

### Across

- 1 Terminal Bar
- 14 Cinematic wear for the Devil
- 15 Race in a regatta
- 16 Words before about
- 17 With 26- and 44-Across, what Raymond Burr said about no longer playing 60-Across
- 20 Beat, but barely
- 21 Omar of *ER*
- 22 Source book for *Dreamcoat*
- 23 A *Girl Thing* director
- 25 Early movie dog
- 26 See 17-Across
- 31 Ways to get off
- 35 Dirt chopper
- 36 Invite from bottoms to tops?
- 37 Irish pop singer
- 38 Cleis \_\_\_\_ (erotica source)
- 40 Sam's twitcher when she was a bewitcher
- 41 Straight, to mixologists
- 42 Where they yell "Cut!"
- 43 Moore's costar Ed
- 44 See 17-Across

- 48 Irate, with "off"
- 49 Miley Cyrus' Hannah
- 54 Sex toy, for some
- 56 *Show Boat* rank
- 58 "Help \_\_\_\_ the way!"
- 59 Em, e.g.
- 60 Lawyer played by Raymond Burr
- 62 *Chicago* producer Meron
- 63 Award coveted on *Mad Men*
- 64 Cara of *Fame*
- 65 Greeting for a mate
- 66 Navratilova, for one
- 67 Condom material

### Down

- 1 Long talk
- 2 Eat away at
- 3 Jessica of *Feud*
- 4 Time waster
- 5 Like a beard's date
- 6 Billie Jean won this often
- 7 Al of Alison Bechdel's field
- 8 Fibber's repertoire
- 9 He made boxers more visible
- 10 *The Gay Kama Sutra* suggestions
- 11 *Odd Girl Out* author
- 12 Work your fingers to the bone
- 13 *Ziegfeld Follies* costume designer

- 18 "For \_\_\_\_ jolly good ..."
- 22 "Morally straight" org.
- 24 It turns out its.
- 25 Is unlike Dorian Gray
- 27 *Gone with the Wind* guy
- 28 Canon shooter
- 29 Jane Siberry's "I \_\_\_\_ Aloud"
- 30 Belgian border river
- 31 Butch Janet
- 32 From the top
- 33 Cather novel of 1918
- 34 How Dr. Kildare treated his clients?
- 38 Answered a judge
- 39 Political analyst Reagan
- 43 *The Fountainhead* author Rand
- 45 "Look at Me, I'm Sandra \_\_\_\_"
- 46 Cho activity
- 47 Theater award
- 50 It tops a queen
- 51 It's a good thing
- 52 Not a single person
- 53 Wing for Julia Morgan
- 54 Sharp pain
- 55 Tinted
- 56 *Kiss of the Spider Woman* setting
- 57 *Aida* solo
- 60 You can double-click your mouse on these
- 61 A thousand Gs



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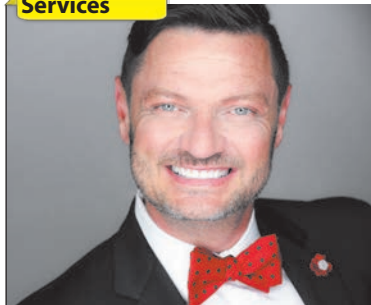
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