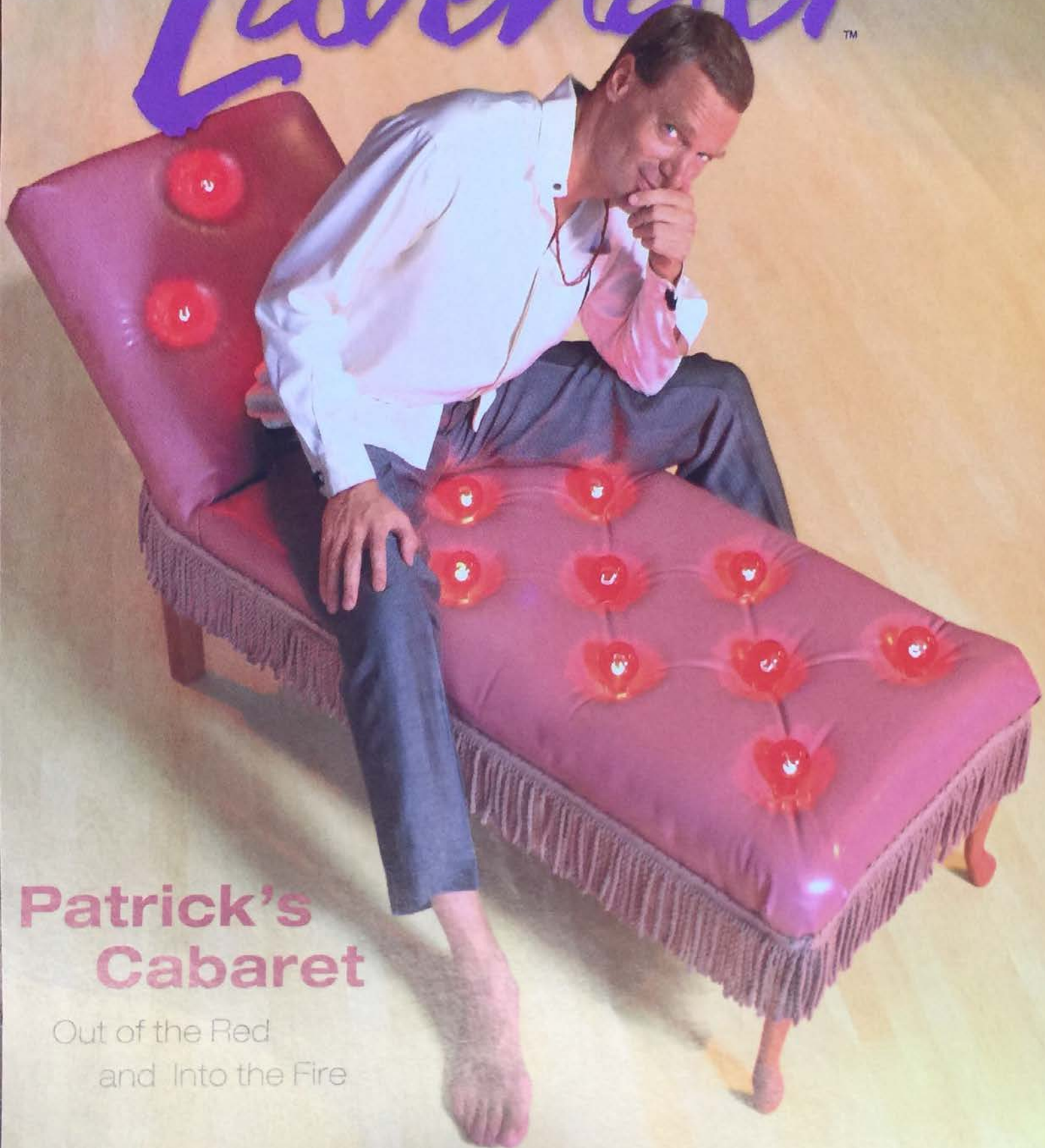


Patrick's Cabaret moving Lavender 1999

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Patrick's Cabaret

Out of the Red
and Into the Fire

Out of the **RED** and Into the **FIRE**

Patrick Scully and his cabaret prevail throughout the pain and pleasure of progress

by jeremy norton

photos by s. ray

Patrick Scully is a hard man to miss in any crowd: The 45-year-old performer-activist-radical faerie stands 6'8", has striking features, and a powerful personality. The name and the generating force behind Patrick's Cabaret, Scully plays many roles within this area's dance, theater, and creative communities. If one has seen any of his own performance work, it is also likely one has seen Scully in the buff, as nudity plays a central part in his performance aesthetic. I met with Scully at his amazing new space next to the police station on Minnehaha and Lake Street in South Minneapolis. After nearly three years of hardship, stress, loads of red-tape hassle, and truly bizarre twists, the Cabaret has found a safe, and wonderful, residence, one that should suit it far into the next century.

JN: It seems to take a lot of grace and confidence, lending your name to the venue such as yours and allowing others to do their thing on stage. How do you select and coordinate each Cabaret?

PS: I like to have as much of a mix as I can, as eclectic as possible. Sometimes I end up with a classical cellist followed by a naked performance artist. So people don't know what to expect, or they can't be sure what will come next.

The main thing I control is the amount of time people are on stage. I mean, in 15 minutes, if a piece is wonderful then the audience leaves wanting more, and if something's really bad, well, 15 minutes won't kill anyone.

On a more complex level, I also have to take into consideration gender, and age, and race, and sexual orientation, and it requires taking into consideration the medium people are working in, as well as the aesthetics with that medium.

I try to factor all of that into the mix.

And it seems to work; most of the time, I'd say you beat the odds.

Yeah. Some shows are more exciting than others, but I can't think back to a single show when I said, "This whole night was a total waste." I want the Cabaret to be a place where we can all come together and share things from our lives. And I don't care if what's shared is stories, movies, or songs.

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What's your take on where we stand in the realm of alternative performance arts, now, in 1999?

There are certainly, it seems to me, more people doing performance stuff. So the balance of what's getting performed might seem less eccentric than what we used to see, less so than what performance art is known for. Because it's much harder to be eccentric—and genuine—in a room full of eccentrics.

Ten years ago, the Cabaret was happening, but it wasn't happening twice a month. I was actually pretty nervous when we went to two weekends a month, worrying would we have the talent, the performers to fill the place...and, too, would there be an audience for the increased shows. At this point I'm confident that I could go every weekend, that there are enough people, good folks who deserve to be on stage.

In that way, things are really healthy. There are lots of people thinking of themselves as artists, working in whatever form they find stimulates them. Willing to step out there and expose themselves, to be heard and seen.

How have things changed over this decade?

I can talk about that in an even longer perspective. In 1980, a guy named Ken Majerus did the first showcase of queer performers in Minneapolis (at the time he would have called it gay/lesbian, but it was definitely Queer). He was looking for gay and lesbian artists with an alternative aesthetic. It was held in the Little Theater at the U's Coffman Union. I knew everyone in the show because there were only a handful of us who were out and around and Queer in terms of our aesthetic.

Now, 20 years later, to do the same thing, it would have to be a several-weeklong festival. I mean, just presenting local performers. I've had it in mind to do something like that, host a festival for queer performance artists. It's something I'm hoping to do in 2001.

Content-wise, for a long time, coming-out stories predominated, which was essential, the self-declarations. But performers have become more

sophisticated over time. Coming-out tales are still valid, but of less significance in the larger spectrum. We've gained more depth, more complexity to our material and to our handling of it.

I think queer artists have taken the lead in terms of creating space for the rest of the community to exist in. I believe it's the work that early folks did—those of us claimed our identities as queer performers early on—that gave other people an opportunity to see themselves reflected in ways they simply didn't and couldn't find in the mainstream.

Another change you mentioned is the sheer expansion of how people identify themselves.

Right, that is a change over the past years. It's not a duality, gay or straight; things are much more complex than that—sexually, racially, in so many ways. There's a confluence of factors—gender, race, sexuality, politics, and artistic view—that contributes to what I'd call Queer Performance. A rejection of the dominant heterosexist paradigm.

You seem to be in a good position to challenge or refute dogmatic political stances.

I'm glad that, at least for now, I'm not a politician. For me, it's all about inviting people to be at the table, to share in the process.

This new space seems like a great way to share.

You know, it was a moment of great pride for me when we raised the rainbow flag over this building. It surprised me, the amount of emotion that welled up. Having grown up during the Vietnam War, the American flag is really complex for me. There's so much I both love and hate about this country. But to be able to have this great building and to raise a huge flag up high, it was a way of saying to the world, "I'm queer; I'm here; I will not be made invisible." I've been doing that for years with my artwork, but to be able to do that with a building—man! I wanted a Perkin's-sized rainbow flag up there.

But it's more complex than that, too. Because Patrick's Cabaret isn't just for gay people. It is a place where we as queer people get to be as out as we have the courage to be, where we will be challenged to be even more out, but also to have a space where someone won't feel unwelcome because they're straight. I mean, we all live on the same block. I think we're a healthier community when we can all share our secrets and fears.

Has the coded-language changed, or developed, with greater visibility?

It's gotten more complex. It used to be utterly the norm to go through high school, as I did, and never hear the word *gay*—hear anything positive or real about homosexuality. That's not possible any longer. Matthew Shepards were killed when I was in high school; it's just no one gave them any coverage. And so in some ways, because things are more complex, more open, it seems like there's less of a sense of urgency.

Look at the AIDS epidemic: With the drugs now available, many people are doing better. But things are only less urgent for some people; for a great many people, things are as desperate and urgent as they've ever been.

It's important to look beyond the over-simplified way things are presented in our culture. There's more room for hope, and there's more room for despair. More people lead assimilated, closeted lives, and there's more room for people like me to create the space to live our lives on our own terms.

How can you battle that sense of complacency, the diminished urgency?

I think it's the job of artists to tell the truth. If I see things as being urgent, it's up to me to engage with that. Many of us are disturbed by what we feel to be complacency in our midst, and the response, artistically, is to address that, to challenge it. Some people don't feel that need. I'm very hesitant to proscribe what people are "supposed" to be doing—except in more philosophical terms like, "Tell the Truth."

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Chronology of a Cabaret

APR. 1986 First Cabaret is held in basement of St. Stephen's School in Minneapolis where Scully works with the rocking nuns.

MAY 1989 Cabaret moves across the river of urban blight, I-35, to the ex-mortuary on E. 24th Street, where Scully combines his living space for part of the time he operates.

JUNE 1996 Licensing officials bring Fire Marshal to close Cabaret. Six-month exile, during which Scully attempts to negotiate the exorbitant upgrade costs.

JAN. 1997 Cabaret reopens as a "lodge." Odd fellows, indeed. Capacity greatly diminished, but the people are thrilled.

APR. 30, 1999 Final performance at old space.

MAY 21, 1999 First performance on Minnehaha at the ex-firehouse, situated adjacent to police station. Irony prevails.

SPACE FOR RENT The new space is MASSIVE! Down the road, Scully envisions having a second performance space, or a cafe or something, which could provide a fuller use of the vast warehouse space.

Anyone interested in discussing rental possibilities should contact the Cabaret at (612) 724-6273.

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That's a healthy outlook.

I'm very fortunate. I feel like I lead a charmed life. There were times, over the past three years, from when the Cabaret got closed, through all the bureaucratic hassles, that I considered just letting it float away. Let it disappear. But there was such strong, positive support and encouragement from so many different people in the community: I realized it was important to continue what we've built. Through the amazing generosity of several people, I can make this space available to the community.

So I decided to fight for this thing as it is now. And, of course, I was taught a whole lot about letting go. You can't make much of this stuff happen. I mean, you can't just will a faerie godmother to appear—

No, though many of us are still clicking our heels and hoping...

I've made choices, throughout my life, where what made most sense to me was the thing that many would say was the most risky, the least secure. I'm thinking in terms of material comfort or success.

It's important to live in one's conscience, to follow one's heart. I figure, with all the privileges I enjoy as a white middle-class man in America,

if with all that as a fallback, I'm not willing to take risks, then why should anybody? And so, with this venture...tomorrow I could lose all my foundational support, someone could steal our computers, and all I need is one dollar per month, plus money for utilities, and we can still have the Cabaret. It's a fabulous position.

You mentioned politics. What about them?

Well, I'm thinking about—and I mean *thinking* about—running for mayor of Minneapolis.

If you do run, there'll be no skeletons from your closet since your doors are so wide open.

That's definitely true. I have few secrets. If people want to see me in *Honcho*, I'll give them the issue number.

And there are very real issues I'd pursue as mayor. I mean, we have an incredibly rich cultural community here, and one of the great failings of city leadership is that they utterly ignore all the potential of the cultural communities. The city leaders do absolutely zero.

For an easy example, when the Cabaret got closed down in Phillips neighborhood, at that location, a city with any type of vision would have done whatever it could to keep the Cabaret there. Because, when we were up and running, the more we were going, the fewer drug dealers there were about. People coming to a place for

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viable activity is anathema to drug dealers. It was a huge failing on the part of the city.

It was the city of Minneapolis that removed us from Phillips neighborhood. And I'm not complaining, in terms of the Cabaret, because we have a wonderful new location, and will participate, I hope, in the revitalization of this area, but I'm sad for Phillips.

And this isn't a strong mayoral town; the city council runs things. As mayor, I'd see myself providing inspiration. Being a role model. Saying, "I can't fix all your problems, but here're some options, some ideas." I'd try to provide a vision of what we can do better, as a city.

Do you see a time when you won't be at the forefront, the direct management, of the Cabaret's organizing structure?

That's something I've been working on for a little while now; my hope is that someday this will happen whether or not I'm still on the planet. Or if, say, I decided I really need to get into filmmaking, then I want there to still be a Cabaret. Which is one of the reasons we incorporated as a non-profit and have set up a board of directors. It also became more work than I wanted to handle. So, yeah, there could be a day when there's a different artistic director here. I mean, they still call it the Guthrie, and he's been gone a while.

To a degree, the success of what happens here, the form of things, depends on my charisma. But, hey, I'm certainly not the only charismatic person out there. It's part of the job description: a host who makes people feel welcome and want to be there.

Has it been difficult by living your life so openly to work through hard times and heartbreaks?

There are a few downsides. I wish...you know, nobody publicizes divorces the way they do marriages. It would have been great if someone had run a front page article about breaking up, so I wouldn't have had to tell so many people. They could have just read about it.

We have this great wealth of information in Western culture about romance and falling in love, but we don't have that information about when things don't work out. I think it would be a really interesting piece to have both our versions, mine and Djola Branner's, about how

things fell apart. I know they'd be different and illuminating, side-by-side.

You said during the photo shoot that your goal [with perpetual nudity] is to get to a place where people are embarrassed to be wearing clothes at all.

For me, it's all about rejecting unhealthy rules, and in rejecting them creating a space for me and others to live by a different set of rules. I imagine a world where a teenage boy who gets an erection in the locker room, instead of being hassled and shamed, would get cheered and have his sexuality celebrated. "Go, Joe! What a great boner!"

Being naked on stage is a way for me to confront erotophobia and bodyphobia. I think if Clinton and Hussein were naked in a room together, a lot fewer bombs would fall. If we lived in a world where we were encouraged to be comfortable in our bodies, in all shapes and types of bodies, a lot of harsh and crazy stuff would cease to occur.