

Dirty Dreams of a Drama Geek:

Writer/director Allen Sawyer readies 'Lavender Lockerroom' for Rhino

by Jim Van Buskirk

When my friend Allen Sawyer agreed to an interview in the midst of rehearsing his new play, *Lavender Lockerroom*, I suggested we meet in his apartment. Perched on the edge of Nob Hill, it is convenient to Theatre on the Square, where Sawyer has managed the box office for the past eight years. In the late '70s, Sawyer was the manager of the Castro Theatre, and he later worked briefly as a spotlight operator at the Nob Hill Adult Theater.

Sawyer's cluttered apartment reflects many of his passions, including a vast collection of vintage and contemporary Disneyana, hundreds of movies on DVD and VHS, piles of sheet music, books, magazines, seemingly every album ever recorded, and of course classic pulp paperbacks from the 1950s and '60s. On the walls hang photographs and posters representing some of the many shows he has written and/ or directed over the past two decades. A portrait by Tom Harding, his partner of many years, shows a handsome young Sawyer pouting winsomely under a cascade of curls.

Sawyer's first production, a celebration of the music of Jerome Kern entitled *A Fine Romance*, had a successful run at the Valencia Rose in 1981. This led to a long collaboration with John Kart producing and directing centennial concerts of Irving Berlin, Cole Porter and Ira Gershwin at the Plush Room and Great American Music Hall. The duo also directed *Dirty Dreams of a Clean-Cut Kid*, *Homo for the Holidays* and the long-running hits *Jungle Red* and *Dirty Little Showtunes*. With the Artfull Circle, Sawyer adapted and directed *Those Damn Calla Lilies*, *Women's Prison Christmas*, *Way Out West* and *Christmas with the Crawfords*.

Despite his long and colorful career, Sawyer remains relatively unknown. His trademark thick black horn-rimmed glasses reflect his unassuming attitude: "Deep down, I still think of myself as the drama geek who's amazed that the cool kids want to be in his little plays." Some of those cool kids over the years have included Connie Champagne in *A Judy Garland Christmas* at Piaf's, Miss X in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the late Ann Drogynous in *The Kid Herself*, and the notorious Bambi Lake at Josie's.

"I've never been a 'name above the title' kind of guy. That's why I founded the Hot Pants Homo Players. I thought if people couldn't remember my name, they might remember HPHP as sort of a brand name."

Under the HPHP banner, Sawyer wrote and directed *Gross Indulgences: The Trials of Liberace* and *Whatever Happened to Sister George*. Most recently, Sawyer staged San Francisco's popular version of the long—running New York musical revue *Naked Boys Singing*. He is currently working on *Butterfield 8 1/2* and *Imitation of Lana*.

Sawyer, who served as production manager of the Sing-a-Long Sound of Music, has also stage managed many productions, including Lawrence Helman's *Cabaret at the Herbst* starring Christine Ebersole, Claiborne Cary and Maureen McVerry, and most recently Helman and Marc Huestis' *An Evening with Ann-Margret*.

Lavender Lockerroom represents the final chapter in a trilogy inspired by pulp paperbacks which began with *Hot Pants Homos*, followed by *Senator Swish*. One of Sawyer's early influences was *Boarding School Whore*, "a porno paperback I read as a teenager. I still remember its plot, about a young woman who goes home during her school vacation. She has sex with the school's head-mistress, the chauffeur who drives her home, the mechanic in the garage, the

gardener she meets walking from the driveway to her front door, the butler who answers the door, and the maid who's cleaning her bedroom.

"My pulp plays are plotted like that," Sawyer said. They are a mixture of invention and adaptation of actual novels. "There is a book called *Hot Pants Homo*, but it's the story of a guy fighting his homosexual urges. After attempting to have sex with a few men and many women, he finally finds a female psychiatrist who sleeps with him and turns him straight. I started with the first chapter and then rewrote it into a gay-positive story about coming out. I wrote it like a novel, and we performed it in a word-for-word style."

Having read drafts of scenes as Sawyer generated them, I was unprepared for how ribald *Lavender Lockerroom* was when performed by actors at the first reading of the finished script. "Any good director will tell you that 90 percent of your job is casting," Sawyer explained. "If you assemble the right cast you can just sit back and watch it all fall into place." The right cast for *Lavender Lockerroom*, opening at Theatre Rhino on March 8, includes David Bicha, Isaac Brantner, Deena Davenport, Trauma Flintstone, Sandy Schlechter and Drew Todd.

During rehearsals come minor changes. "For example, I noticed I used 'turgid' too many times," Sawyer admitted. "Also, I picture the scene as I'm writing, but then using real people whose joints only bend one way, we've had to change some ups and downs, rights and lefts, ins and outs."

Sawyer makes it sound deceptively simple to create campy sex comedies, which he lovingly refers to as "pornographic after-school ' specials. They're very funny and very smutty. These are the only plays that my parents aren't invited to."

HPHPlayers and Theatre Rhinoceros present *Lavender Lockerroom*

in the Studio at Theatre Rhinoceros March 7-11. For tickets (\$15-\$18), call 861- 5079,