



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Hot Patootie, Bless My Soul

By **ANDREW ASCH**

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It's after midnight at the Art Theatre in Long Beach. A movie is in progress, but it's hard to concentrate on the screen because a mob of people in platform shoes, leather bustiers, rockabilly gear and Bride-of-Frankenstein-meets-KISS makeup are doing, er, the Time Warp.

For the record, the Time Warp is a dance from the movie musical, sci-fi spoof and cult phenomenon known as "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." The scene at the Art Theatre is business as usual for Midnight Insanity, the amateur theater troupe that performs along with the film at midnight screenings every Saturday. But for troupe producer Mark Tomaino, it's the culmination of a life quest.

In September of 1992, Tomaino was a 31-year-old evangelical Christian who was questioning his faith and had resigned as lay leader of the singles ministry at the former Melodyland Christian Center in Anaheim. When a friend from an Internet bulletin board announced that she was attending "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" one evening, Tomaino caught Midnight Insanity's extravaganza at the Art Theatre.

Tomaino attended the next week's show, volunteered for the troupe and never looked back. The Midnight Insanity folks may have looked odd, but they proved to be the fellowship Tomaino sought. "When I missed church for a few weeks, nobody would call," he says. "But if you missed anything at 'Rocky,' somebody calls and asks if you're OK."

Today, Tomaino, 41, produces and performs in the vampy, campy show every Saturday. Midnight Insanity turned 15 in January, making it one of the oldest of at least 50 “Rocky Horror Picture Show” troupes in America. The troupes sprouted soon after the 1975 release of the film, based on Richard O’Brien’s gender-bending stage sendup of pop culture phenomena such as B-grade sci-fi and horror movies, rock music and gay camp humor. (Actor Tim Curry has yet to live down his demented turn as “Rocky Horror’s” Dr. Frank-N-Furter, a self-described “sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania.”)

For those who have never thrilled to a late-night “Rocky Horror” screening, the setup is this: Troupe members (think “Rocky Horror” fanatics with a penchant for the spotlight) portray characters, pantomiming songs, lines and action while the film screens. Audience members (many costumed devotees themselves who return week after week, Tomaino says) add to the dada atmosphere by yelling retorts to favorite lines and hurling rice and toilet paper.

Tomaino says about 150 fans attend the shows, which feature a sound and light crew, costumed actors, sets and props. Tomaino, who by day owns a matchmaking service, In Touch Dating, learned to play the saxophone at age 37 for his role as Eddie, the sax-playing biker immortalized by Meat Loaf in the film (chorus from Eddie’s big number: “Hot Patootie, Bless My Soul, I Really Love That Rock ‘n’ Roll”).

The cast and crew meet weekly and even operate their own crisis hotline for troubled “Rocky” fans. “We’ve had calls from people who are at the end of their rope and wouldn’t call a regular hotline,” Tomaino says. “We’re not trying to rush [them] to the hospital. We [tell them] we care, and to say ‘hi’ at next Saturday’s [‘Rocky Horror’] show. Then they have something to look forward to.”

Indeed, Midnight Insanity director Becky Roberts suspects that the show’s loyal audiences return for more than entertainment. “A lot of people think of it as therapy. They think of it as a primal scream.” As for the troupe members, doing the Time Warp

every week is a chance to “rose tint my world,” to quote a “Rocky Horror” lyric. “Each of us in the cast is a dolt,” Tomaino says. “Just a bunch of people with no creative outlets. But on Saturday nights, we’re important.”

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