

# My lunch with Bruce

BY JOEL DOSSI  
Feature Contributor

While attending an American Theater Critics meeting in New York last month, I got a nagging sense in the pit of my stomach: because society has become so queer savvy, I may soon be out of a job as a pundit for gay media.

Gone are the days when gay subtext had to be dredged from the bottom of popular culture. Perhaps I'll have to resign myself to rehashing old Bruce Vilanch jokes, I worried.

After all, everyone knows that it took "Will & Grace" three seasons before Will kissed a man. What self-respecting straight woman hasn't given her boyfriend grooming hints gleaned from a "Queer Eye" episode? And who hasn't joined in on the fun of picking out the gay guys from the metrosexuals in "American Idol?"

Gay-themed theater hardly raises an eyebrow anymore, either. A perusal of recent off-Broadway shows reads like a Pride celebration.

There's "Joy," starring Ben Curtis of "Hey dude, you're gettin' a Dell!" fame. Like characters in most gay plays, he "drops trou," displaying his backside. (Or, more precisely, he raises his toga; but that's another story.)

Perhaps the most eagerly awaited gay-themed show of the season is "Altar Boyz," a pop musical chronicling the struggles of a Christian boy-band looking for their big break. Being "politically correct," the group is inclusive, complete with a "sensitive boy" whose favorite religious icon is the Patron Saint of Flexible Hold Hair Gel, Vidal of L'Oreal.

Today, there seems to be so much homosexuality in the theater that it has almost become a non-issue.

The first evening of the conference I walked past the Neil Simon Theatre, where Bruce Vilanch stars in the musical "Hairspray." The show had just finished, and throngs of high school-aged teenagers crowded the sidewalk.

"Great!" I thought. "Now I'll be able to tell if there is a future in commenting on gay art."

But not one of those pimply-faced teenagers made a disparaging remark about the lead actor's sexuality! In fact, homosexuality never entered into their conversations, despite the gay actor who plays the leading lady.

"Is he really that fat?" one student asked about Vilanch. "Does he have to shave his legs?" questioned another. "What about his pits?" a third inquired.

"Who cares?" I wanted to scream. "Vilanch shaves his eyebrows! Isn't that a fascinating tid-bit?"



ONE OF HIS GAY DAYS: Bruce Vilanch at a GLAAD event. The furry star of "Hairspray" had nary a queer word to say when Joel Dossi met him at a theater luncheon.

Evidently, it wasn't. The teenagers boarded their bus without ever looking back at the marquee, and my heart sank. So I returned to my hotel room, dejected.

The next day, refreshed at the thought of attending the conference's "celebrity luncheon," I hustled to Sardi's Restaurant. The placards designating the stars' places at the tables excited me even more. Among others, there was Phylicia Rashad, Julie Halston, and — oh my God — both Harvey Fierstein and Bruce Vilanch!

"Which one should I sit next to?" I pondered. Fierstein has been my idol since 1983,

when he won two Tony Awards for "Torch Song Trilogy." But now he's gone straight with "Fiddler on the Roof," or at least as straight as one can expect Fierstein to be.

At least Vilanch will say a queer word or two, I decided. So I sat down, one chair away. Vilanch wore a T-shirt that read, "New Jersey, where the rock ends."

"You must like associating with your fans," I said, breaking the ice. "I remember one of your appearances, and you talked with fans for over an hour."

"I had tickets to sell," Vilanch answered politely as he munched on a near-raw green bean.

"What's the hardest thing about leaving California?" another critic asked.

"Having to listen to my angry house sitter, who calls each day saying, 'You need a new roof,'" was Vilanch's terse reply.

"Have you learned anything from the many stars who've played at the Neil Simon Theatre?" a third asks.

"Yes," said Vilanch. "Elaine Stritch told me not to use the toilet in the dressing room. She had the same dressing room for 'At Liberty,' and she couldn't stop thinking about all the famous assholes who've sat there before."

We all laughed, but that was it. No deep words of wisdom. No poignant quips for gays to live by. Only a man, like everyone else, surviving day to day at his chosen profession, regardless of his sexuality.

Vilanch politely excused himself, and headed to the theater for his makeup call.

## Cho business

### STAND UP

continued from page | 17

other than as a performer where it's very natural," says the soft-spoken Cho, who saves her roar for show time. "It doesn't come naturally to me in everyday speech, so people are very taken aback, I suppose."

Still, the issues of gay rights and female empowerment that course through her comedy are ever-present. Cho acknowledges that the "Assassin" tour takes a far more political slant than previous outings such as "I'm the One That I Want" and "Notorious C.H.O."

"In this day and age, it really is kind of inevitable if you are at all a compassionate person. Everybody is kind of weighing in," she says. "I went to see Bob Dylan and Merle Haggard opened and he was Bush bashing. It was intense, because it was Merle Haggard. It was so surprising. It's great. I love country music and yet a lot of the politics of country music are not mine. You go to things like that not expecting it — well, from Bob Dylan, because Bob Dylan is very political, but he's not really country, he's kind of his own thing. But somebody like Merle Haggard, who I really love, and yet don't necessarily think I'm going to agree with, is totally Bush bashing. (Laughs) Everybody's mobilizing."

So how did the election slip away?

"It wasn't really about losing, it was really about all of the prejudice and hysteria and hatred that exists just underneath the surface of American society," Cho replies. "So many people turned out to vote against gay marriage."

"To me, it's not about losing the election more than it is about really seeing how much we have to grow as people. That's a big problem that so much prejudice exists and it's so immediate and we see the results of that in choosing a president. People would rather have Bush for

president than gay marriage and really, gay marriage does nothing to anyone. Gay marriage does not start wars with people; gay marriage does not make an embarrassment of our nation. It's something that completes the idea of freedom for all. People are so readily able to be hateful rather than rational."

"Assassin" is designed to grow and change as Cho travels, with room to insert material directly from the latest headlines. Less prevalent this time out is the body-conscious humor that dominated "I'm the One That I Want," which detailed her painful struggles with her weight and self-image during her short-lived network TV stint as the "All-American Girl."

Cho says her feelings about her body are different now because she became a dancer.

"I'm dancing professionally — I'm a belly dancer," she says. "If I have time I will work at Moon of Tunis, which is this Tunisian restaurant here in Los Angeles and I'll dance professionally. It's very difficult — it's a workout. But to me it doesn't feel like one, because it's such a beautiful art form."

"I look at myself differently than I had in the past because I used to be very critical in terms of like, 'Oh I'm fat,' or 'I hate this, I hate that.' But now it's like my body is very much an instrument to this dance. I do this and it really is almost like another part of the orchestra or a way to illustrate the music."

"It's great because I become kind of relieved of this very suffocating idea of self that was really depressing in the past, so now I've gotten freedom from a lot of body issues. Women who do belly dance unanimously agree that it is an amazing, amazing cure for body issues in general."

Cho will tackle issues of body image and sexual orientation in the first of two young-adult novels she's signed to write for HarperCollins.

"That's something I feel very connected to and it will be an interesting process," she says. "I do a lot of different kinds of writing, so that's one project. I have another book coming out in the fall, which is a book of political essays."



Photo by Austin Young

NO BUSINESS LIKE CHO BUSINESS: Margaret is back in South Florida with her latest tour de force, but if given the opportunity to pick any guest-starring TV gig, she'd opt for a more passive role: "Gosh, I'd love to be a dead person on 'Six Feet Under.' That's so fun," she says. "I love the beginning where people get killed; it's really funny. It's terrible, but it's always sort of funny. I'd love to do that. That'd be great."

She's also wrapped filming on "Bam Bam and Celeste," which she wrote and stars in alongside her good friend Bruce Daniels (who is opening for her on the "Assassin" tour). The two met on a film years ago that never made it to theaters, and enjoyed the experience so much they wanted to look for other ways to collaborate.

They play the titular duo in "Bam Bam and Celeste," friends who escape their Midwestern hometown for a road trip to New York City. Once there, they take on their high school nemeses and, of course, learn that beauty comes from within.

"I think we're both probably more mature and secure with ourselves and secure with our identity," Cho says, by way of comparison to their characters. "But for me insecurity is such a fun place to be when you're writing. It's a very interesting state of mind, because there are so many ways that we can trick ourselves, and question ourselves and get so self-involved. It's just as hard as dealing with someone who is

incredibly narcissistic, because they're so involved in their own self-doubt they can't really see anything. I think we're a lot more able to be with ourselves than the characters."

It's yet another opportunity Cho has created for herself in response to a Hollywood machine that has no idea what to do with a Korean-American actress/comedienne. "It's not like there's something that exists for me out there, yet at the same time I'm unwilling to sit back and allow stand-up to be the only thing because I really do love filmmaking," she says. "There's got to be a way, which is writing your own projects, which is fine."

And when she's not multi-tasking on writing, acting and stand-up, she's ... working on a quilt.

"Things like that are really difficult, the fiber arts," Cho says. "They're so hard and so engrossing and involving and those I find intensely relaxing and very fulfilling."

"I haven't figured out how to bring my sewing with me [when I travel though]. It's kind of a pain with the scissors and the needles because you can't really bring it — you can bring it but you have to check it and I don't really like that."

"It's hard," she adds with an evident grin.

What comes easily is supporting the gay community, something Cho says has been part of her life since before she even understood what she was doing politically. Sometimes she seems like more of a queer activist than her out and proud friends and fans.

"Sometimes it's very hard to understand where you're at and fight for yourself when you're in it," Cho says. "It's about relying on other people and then I can rely on them when I feel weaker. There's a Turkish saying that you become strong by standing up for other people, so that's how I live, by activism. That's a really important way to look at it for me."

**Margaret Cho's "Assassin Tour" comes to the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 S.W. Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale at 8 p.m., May 6. Tickets are \$29.50 and \$45. For more information, call (954) 462-0222 or visit [browardcenter.org](http://browardcenter.org).**