DO YOU WANNA DANCE?

By Linda S. Buyer

All four thousand seats in Chicago’s Art Nouveau Auditorium Theater were filled. Vietnam, Woodstock and the Kent State Massacre changed the Auditorium’s audience from a sea of dark suits accompanied by pearls and little black dresses into a rainbow of mostly twenty-something males with long hair and sideburns, wearing all-over-print Quiana shirts depicting colorful jungle scenes, birds in flight, butterflies.

The sidewalks in front of the Auditorium were completely cleared of the mounds of filthy snow blocking access everywhere else along Congress Parkway. Just before eight o’clock Susan and Al exited their taxi and headed straight toward the three roughhewn stone arches that sheltered the recessed entrance doors.

Al managed the shoe store in downtown Evanston where Susan worked after high school and on the weekends. Susan’s mother had given Susan permission to go with Al and his friends because it was, after all, the historic Auditorium; adult homosexuals weren’t interested in a teenage girl; and because Al assured Sherry he’d escort Susan home from the concert.

Al’s friends were waiting in the lobby. Although she knew he was gay, Susan had a gigantic crush on Al. At twenty-five, he was her epitome of cool. His café au lait skin, finger waved curls, long lean body, bell-bottomed attire -- perfection. Comparing Al to his ten friends, she concluded that Al winning the comparisons wasn’t the slam-dunk she expected. *They’re all gorgeous!* Al quickly introduced Susan to everyone, too many names to remember, and suggested they find their seats.

Bette Midler was making her first appearance at the Auditorium; sixth stop on her Divine Miss M tour. Her previous Chicago appearances had been at Mister Kelly’s, an intimate jazz club on Rush Street. Susan had never heard of Bette Midler until Al invited her to join him and the “Bette Devotees.” The Devotees had attended all of her Mister Kelly’s performances. Susan accepted Al’s invitation just because he asked.

“Which of her performances was your favorite?” Al asked the Devotees as they climbed the filigreed staircase toward the first balcony after checking their furs and Susan’s serviceable wool maxi coat. “I’m really stoked, but a little worried this place is so Establishment.”

The Scandinavian-looking blue-eyed blond with all the silver rings on his fingers flung his arms wide. “Second one in 1972, when she did ‘Acid Queen.’ I am that queen!” He continued falsetto,

“If your child ain't all he should be now  
This girl will put him right  
I'll show him what he could be now  
Just give me one more night”

“You *are* that queen,” the shirtless, long-legged brunette in black bell bottoms and army surplus flak vest snickered, “but I’m going with the first, when she did ‘Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.’ I often blow eight *at* the bar…”

“You do, don’t you?” Blonde ponytail with the chiseled nose chimed in, chuckling. “How many in Legacy 21’s john last Saturday?”

It was the first time Susan had been to the theater without a parent. Eyeing the audience, straight out of GQ and Cosmopolitan, she stood a little taller, feeling hip for the very first time, then almost lost her balance in her unfamiliar platform shoes.

Arriving at the balcony’s front row, the Devotees seated Susan between Al and Blond rings, who introduced himself as Anders. Twisting around in her seat, she tried to memorize the theatre’s interior details. Mosaics, patinaed bronze, plaster medallions, everything smoothly curvilinear, including the rows of overhead lights running parallel to the stage.

She turned to Al. “Thanks so much for inviting me to join you and your friends. They should be in Manhattan, at Max’s of Kansas nightclub, with Andy Warhol and that crowd. I can’t believe my mom let me come! On a school night! Usually, I have to be in bed by nine.”

The red velvet curtain opened slowly as the overhead lights dimmed and the excited chatter ceased. When it was quiet, a single spot lit stage right about six feet back from the velvet curtain, and a tiny, large-busted red head, wearing a glittering red-and-gold-brocade strapless sheath, stepped into the circle of light. Just as Bette reached the mic, the first two rows of the main floor audience stood. Processing their oddly uniform attire; Susan gasped. Fifty or sixty well-built guys, all wearing nothing more than a white bath towel wrapped around their waists! Glad all eyes were forward when they dropped their towels and remained standing, bare bottoms facing the audience, she quickly pushed her jaw back into place before anyone noticed her gawking. *What the …? Grow up! You’re ridiculous! Just naked men.*

Bette Midler took a bow and cooed at the front row, “Come all the way from New York to see your Bathhouse Betty? Glad to see you *all* too.” Grinning, she signaled to the band in the orchestra pit.

Susan laughed nervously, grabbed the sides of her seat, the soft velvet tickling her palms, leaned over to Al, and whispered “They’re naked! In the Auditorium!? Why?”

“Shush.” Al whispered back. “Listen now. I’ll explain at intermission.”

Susan had never seen anything like it. A hummingbird in spiky heels, Bette Midler was never still. The crowd loved her and fed her energy back as whoops and applause.

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The lights came back on, signaling intermission. Jumping up, Al herded the Devotees, “Come on, if we’re quick, we’ll beat the crowd to the bar. I want a tequila sunrise.”

Susan sipped the wine Al brought her and smiled at him over the rim of her glass, “What was with the towels and the naked guys?”

“She got famous singing at bathhouses in New York. The towels were an homage. Wish we’d thought of that. The balcony behind *us*,” Al grinned at Anders, “would have loved it!”

Addressing the Devotees, he asked, “What do you want to do when this is over? Bar downtown here, or north to Legacy 21?”

The green-eyed man with the silky navy and gray paisley shirt tucked into navy surplus sailor’s pants leaned toward the mirror behind the bar as he picked his short afro. “Legacy 21. I’m looking good,” he smiled approvingly at himself, “and I’d like to get laid tonight. Won’t happen downtown.”

“Any objections?” Al asked.

“Sounds good.”

“We always go there. How about the Blue Pub across the street? Try a new gay bar?”

“Let’s do both. Start at Blue Pub and continue to Legacy 21.”

“How will I get in? I don’t have a fake ID.” Susan asked.

“You look eighteen. They’ll just think you’re our fag hag.” Al said. “One drink with us at the Blue Pub, and then I’ll call you a cab and send you to Evanston. You’ll be safe enough, and your mother’ll never know that we stopped or that I didn’t bring you all the way home. Tell her there was a long line for a cab.” Al winked. “Also that I waited in the taxi until I saw you get inside the lobby door.”

He continued, “Really too bad your parents are so strict. Sixteen, a senior in high school and this is your first concert! You’re much more adult than they give you credit for. Smart as a whip. When Glen had to leave for New York and gave me his ticket, I thought it’d be a great chance to show you something of the world. You know more about Regency England than you do about rock-and-roll. That’s just wrong!”

The lights blinked; indicating the end of the intermission.

The second half of the show was as energetic as the first. Backed by the Harlettes, Bette darted around the stage, the followspot straining to keep pace. Each costume change was more outrageous than the last until she came out in a simple baby blue halter top over hip-hugging flower-print pedal pushers. Announcing her next song would be a ballad, she continued “If that’s too slow for you, keep your eye on these.” She untied her top, dropped it on the stage and offered her naked breasts as an alternative to “Hello in There.” *So cool.* Susan grinned. *Mom couldn’t have known what she was agreeing to. Bette’s not even embarrassed. I’d like to be that confident.*

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When the lights came up again, the Devotees rushed to retrieve their coats and hadn’t even started shivering at the taxi stand before the next three taxis were theirs. Al, Susan, and Anders got in the back of one taxi, and the green-eyed man with the afro got in the front. Turning toward the back, he said, “Susan, I’m Earl. What’d you think?”

“Wow! I wasn’t expecting that! Bette Midler was having so much fun! She must love performing. I’ve never seen an adult so happy.”

“She’s contagious. I’m always ‘up’ for a couple of days after one of her concerts. Nice of the bathhouse boys to organize that tribute for her. I know *I* appreciated it,” Earl winked, “and I only saw their backsides. Would’ve doubly appreciated her view!”

“Weren’t they worried about getting arrested? Or her, when she took off her top? It’s the Auditorium, not some strip joint!”

Al grinned at Susan. “It’s the Age of Aquarius. *Hair*’s mainstream. ‘Nudity abounds …’ It’s not like those classics you’re always reading, set in the past. This is modern; reality.”

The cab pulled up in front of the Blue Pub, right behind the two taxis with the rest of the Devotees. Al, reaching forward with a ten, said, “I’ll get this, you guys can each buy me a drink.”

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Susan, sipping her wine, looked curiously around the Blue Pub’s dark interior. Her attention was immediately captured by a well-built man at the bar whose unbuttoned shirt revealed a thick mat of curly black chest hair and a lacy red bra. He was leaning over and whispering something that made the man in the long diamante earrings laugh loudly.

*Okay. Be cool. They’re just having a good time. The one in the bra just slid his hand down the back of the other guy’s pants.* She thought about what he might be doing and was surprised to feel excited. *I must be a little drunk. I’m having a good time. Too bad this drink’s almost finished… I wish I could stay.*

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Al looked down toward Susan and instructed the cabbie, “Six Nineteen Sheridan. In Evanston. Wait until she’s inside.” He gave Susan a ten. “This should be more than enough with a tip.” He kissed her forehead.

Susan settled into the back seat. *He kissed me!* Throwing her head back, she caressed the seats on either side of her, thoroughly pleased with her night out.

A few minutes later she sat up, frowning. *Home to a nine o’clock curfew and a mother who doesn’t even trust me, at sixteen, to stay home alone while she and daddy go to Paris for a week over spring break.* *Can’t even take a taxi home from downtown by myself*. *Have to be chaperoned by an adult.*

*Sucks.*

*Moving out’s the answer. Not to a dorm though. An apartment. So I can have a life. Fingers crossed University of Illinois at Chicago Circle accepts me. They don’t have dorms; a perfect reason to move into an apartment. They wouldn’t have to explain to why I’m moving out so young. Won’t be embarrassed. That’s all they’ll care about.*

Satisfied, she nodded and let her head fall back against the seat again.

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Her mother was stretched out, reading on the blue living room couch when Susan arrived. “How was the concert?”

“Great. Made me want to dance.” She started to hum under her breath. “You wouldn’t have liked it. Guys in the front rows sat bare-butt in their seats.”

“If that were true, I wouldn’t, but you were at the Auditorium. That certainly didn’t happen. It’s way past your bedtime. Get ready for bed.”

“If you say so. G’night.”