1001 Beds
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A pernicious effect of the “culture war” has been the media-stoked “controversies” that result when performances by Tim Miller are scheduled, particularly in smaller cities. “The Battle of Chattanooga” recounts a 1999 episode in Tennessee—hardly unique, as discussed in his lawsuit deposition and shown by similar events in Dallas, Durham, Seattle, and elsewhere. As Miller notes, these episodes are typically initiated by self-characterized concerned supporters of the arts who seek to cancel controversial presentations in order not to jeopardize funding for sponsoring institutions—the arts equivalent of destroying a village in order to save it.

This account situates Miller’s post-NEA troubles within the context of his knowledge of American history, suggesting how intricately Miller weaves his defense of his rights and responsibilities as an artist activist with his belief in the rights that have been guaranteed to—yet all too frequently denied—various groups of American citizens.

As a wandering queer performer who travels to up to forty cities a year, I have a front row seat to witness the lively diversity of audiences and artists who gather in hundreds of gay theaters, arts centers, bookstores, choruses, and film festivals. On the other hand, almost
as often I am witness to the homophobic fights that seep out of the septic tank whenever a lesbian or gay man dares to raise their voice in much of troubled America. The much-touted “culture war” has been more a fight over whose voices get heard—whose memories and life story matter—than over whose money is being spent.

Recently I performed in Chattanooga at Barking Legs Theater, sponsored by the Chattanooga Performing Arts Center. I had imagined that this might be a garden-variety gig. I would fly in on a small commuter airplane from Atlanta or Memphis or Raleigh/Durham, meet the local queer and artist energies, teach a workshop, do my shows, get on the plane, hope my check wouldn’t bounce, and go home to snuggle with my boyfriend Alistair.

But I soon realized that this was going to be “one of those gigs.” One of those gigs where a local art bureaucrat, or a Baptist minister or the local KKK, decides to politicize my generally good-natured gay presence in a city and try to get the feathers flying. In this case a woman named Molly Casse, the head of Allied Arts, the local consortium of arts organizations, sent up the Jolly Roger by imagining that I was going to bring wrack and ruin to the arts infrastructure of Greater Chattanooga. It’s interesting to me how frequently the opening shots of these battles are fired not by the local fundamentalists, who are happily unaware of the alternative arts community in their own backyard, but by supposedly well-meaning local arts funders. Funders or fundees, it doesn’t make much of a difference—you’re in a pickle either way. Without the hue and cry raised by these arts “advocate” types, the local right-wing minister would be no more hip to my presence in Chattanooga than I am to his church’s pancake breakfast fund-raiser. But once these panic-meister municipal funding agencies get on the ball—look out! Artists’ heads are sure to roll. They project their own homophobia and hallucinatory fear of having to explain things, and turn what is not even a blip on the right wing’s radar screen into a full-scale front-page-of-the-newspaper war.

Ms. Casse got on the phone and began sending out panic-filled signals about how my arrival in Chattanooga would lower the water
table! corrupt the children! poison the Tennessee River! God knows what else. As she said to the Chattanooga Times Free Press, “We are very concerned that his appearance here will be offensive and could jeopardize the funding all our agencies get from Allied Arts. We don’t want to be the arts police, but we feel strongly about community standards.” Her generous sharing of her homophobia and artphobia with whoever would listen quickly resulted in raising the awareness of the local press, who started to report on a story that existed only because Molly Casse made sure that it showed up on their radar screens. A journalist began making calls to conservative churches, and we had a full scale civil (culture) war brewing, complete with nightly protest demonstrations on the streets of Chattanooga. The Chattanooga Times eventually ran a piece on the front page of the Sunday paper, to let everyone know who didn’t already that a big gay performance artist was coming to town to frighten the horses. Just in time for Sunday sermons, the article got more folks worked up. Suddenly the congregations were roiling, the First Amendment arts supporters were sending solidarity checks, and the audience was making lots of reservations.

A worried e-mail from Barking Legs Theater raised a red flag for me, that maybe they were getting ready to cut their losses, play it safe and cancel my engagement in Chattanooga. Had I been better acquainted with these arts folks in Tennessee, I would have known they were not made of such cautious fiber. Oh Courageous Spirit of the Daughters and Sons of the Volunteer State! I needn’t have worried about it for a second! Nonetheless, since at that time I had no solid information on the backbone-content of the organizers, I didn’t want to make it easy on them to cancel. As a tonic spine-stiffener, I quickly bought my plane ticket and sent them the flight information to make the whole thing feel non-refundable.

To tell the truth, I was feeling a little spooked about what kind of nuts had been unleashed in Tennessee. I have had more than my share of death threats and hate mail over the years, but for some reason this situation in Chattanooga had hit me hard. Maybe because
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it’s the smallest city in the South that I will have ever performed in! The pressure that was being put on the theater in 1999 seemed so retro, so early culture war: obviously we are still fighting that war. The Artistic Director of Barking Legs Theater, Ann Law, kept me updated on the dramas surrounding the gig and the clumsy threats of what might happen if I did indeed perform. Happily the shows had sold out—what a front-page story in the daily newspaper will do! —and Ann let me know that people were sending in donation checks of support. In fact, certain prominent people were coming to the show who had never bothered to come to Barking Legs before. I had also been invited by Professor Peter Smith to be a Tennessee Williams Fellow in the Theater Department at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, as part of my Chattanooga residency. Barking Legs has shifted the financial sponsorship of my shows to them, so the credit (or blame) can be diffused by the cool episcopal halls of academe. No Allied Arts of Chattanooga moneys here!

I must pause now to praise our culture warriors around the U.S., like Ann Law and Prof. Peter Smith, who brave these all-too-frequent dramas. As I dip my spoon into the delicious lesbian and gay culture soup, I find myself in awe of the feisty courage of these people and the messy, human immediacy of our homegrown national queer culture that manages to thrive under the hostile conditions I am describing here. Where would we be without the homo-friendly theaters, alternative art spaces, sleazy drag bars, and independent coffeehouses that enable us to have a unique, non-globalized experience of the edgiest, purest, trashiest, most amazingly fabulous queer expression that money or love can buy? As happy as I am that here in the new millennium we have saucy mainstream representations like Will & Grace, it can also be said that the more prime time these images get, the more likely it is they will be sanitized of any juicy sexuality or confrontational politics. I would bet you a round of Cosmopolitans that if we ever get Will & Grace action figure dolls, we’ll find asexual flat plastic where Jack’s & Will’s meat and potatoes ought to be! That’s why we can be proud of our
thriving grassroots lesbian and gay culture that encourages us to be as raunchy, spiritual, or pissed-off as we are in real life. We need to remember the bold arts organizers, straight and gay, that make sure there’s a place for this work to happen.

Our community is blessed with heroic lesbian and gay arts organizers all over the country, not just in the big cities, who are making festivals happen on a dream, a song, and frequently out of their own checkbooks. If we were to take a tour we might find ourselves in the steamy basement of a St. Louis church where Joan Lipkin, LGBT culture queen of the Show-Me State, is having another packed night of dyke performance. We head north where Howie Baggadonutz has single-handedly made Portland, Oregon, a must stop for every gay touring artist. Cut over a few states east on Interstate 94 to Patrick Scully’s eponymous Patrick’s Cabaret in the Twin Cities, where for years he has nurtured a sex-positive and provocative music, performance and spoken word scene. Then we can scurry down to CSPS arts center in Cedar Rapids, heart of the queer arts in rural Iowa. Dive below the Mason-Dixon Line to the feisty theater Man Bites Dog in Durham, North Carolina, which consistently offers everything from Holly Hughes’ Preaching to the Preverted to Durham’s own St. John’s MCC Gay Gospel Choir. Each of these venues, and there are hundreds more, is gathering the artists and energies and audiences in their communities to make the fiercest lesbian and gay culture on the planet. These journeys through Gay Culture USA fill me with optimism for our tribe’s community-based arts, the people who make it happen and the diverse audiences that gather to be challenged, emboldened and mirrored. It serves as a poignant reminder how our lives, our politics and our community can be transformed as we raise a ruckus through your own local, neighborhood queer culture. As Chairman Mao—or maybe it was Paul Lynde—said, let a thousand queer flowers bloom!

Here now in Chattanooga, I try to remember that my presence, facilitated by these lively arts organizers, can in some small way really challenge the local brew of homophobia and make it publicly
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reveal itself. The performances can also be a gathering place for the local forces of diverse (queer & otherwise) progressive hipness to come forward and embolden one another. This realization certainly helps make me understand why I have sat on a noisy tiny turboprop heading from Memphis—I didn’t even get to see Graceland!—to Chattanooga!

Though I didn’t see the home of the King, I will visit the Civil War battlefields around Chattanooga. For a Civil War buff like me, this is a great opportunity. Get me started on the events of 1863 and I can bore a table full of people quicker than you can say Gettysburg. In the days before flying to Tennessee, I have been reading about the bloody battles at Lookout Mountain, Missionary Ridge, and Chickamauga, just south of town.

I get to Chattanooga late and we go right to the theater to negotiate the grunt work of technical preparations for the show. Other than death threats, technical rehearsals are my least favorite part of this solo-performing racket. But this also gives me a chance to meet the fierce folk who keep the Barking Legs Theater yapping loudly. Ann has pulled this place out of her hat with equal parts chutzpah and her own version of southern charm. She is like an orchestra conductor who has waved her hands over Chattanooga and said, “Presto chango, an alternative performance space on Dodds Avenue!” Her contributions of energy, artistry, and hard work have made a great dance and performance space thrive there on the Tennessee River. Her husband Bruce and fellow workers Charles and Julia have been rafting the white water of the political situation for the last three weeks. Their daughter, the lovely nineteen-month-old Leah, sleeps angelically nearby as we hang the lights. This is my version of American family values: the whole family helps with the technical preparations for the visiting queer performer!

When I arrive at the theater the next day for my performance, there is a palpable cloud of uncertainty. We assume that there will be protesters, but will someone try to get into the sold-out show and heckle the homo? Ann, Charles and I have a tense conversation
about how we would handle that. Ann has sensibly engaged an off-duty Chattanooga police officer as a security guard. A physically impressive African-American man in full police uniform including gun, he makes us all let a little exhale happen. As the audience begins to arrive, so do the protesters. They set up shop across the street, a motley bunch of seven or eight men. They have stashed their wives and children at the corner. People arriving for the show are forced to walk past the protesters across the street, who wave their confederate flag (the black cops we hired for security don’t seem too thrilled) as they shout the usual charming greetings: Faggots! God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve! Sodomites burn in hell! The children down the street join in these cries. This seems to demonstrate this particular church’s version of family values: The Family That Mates Together, Hates Together. There is both the rambunctious spirit of a carnival and the fever of a public hanging full of blood lust. The situation is simultaneously absurd and terrifying.

As I warm up for the show, stretching my body and waking up my voice, I take a break and sneak to where I can get a peek at the demonstrators. I see their faces snarling in a bizarre mad-dog hate. What a strange way to spend their weekend evenings! One man in a cowboy hat is working himself into a froth of hate as he screams at the diverse audience of gay people, sensitive straight folk, and college students. An audience member shouts back to the protesters: Jesus loves you! At that, the most vicious of them lunges across the street with his confederate flag to slaver more inexplicable hate at his fellow citizens of Chattanooga.

I can hear the protesters shouting the whole time as I perform my show Shirts & Skin inside the theater. It adds an edge to the show, that’s for sure. I never learned how to handle this in the Stanislavsky exercises in high school drama class. It’s odd how their symbol of memory, the confederate flag, is being used as a weapon outside a place where my most deeply held memories and life-narratives as a gay man are being given a small venue for a couple of nights in Chattanooga. I often think that the culture wars come down to a civil war
over memory—whose stories are going to be seen as worthy. With those garrulous shouts and waving flags outside Barking Legs Theater as background for my show, I am led to think about this whole strange terrain of autobiographical performance. I am puzzled by the contrary energies that get unleashed when lesbians and gay men speak up about what we have lived and what we remember.

With the fights and curses from the protest outside the theater still echoing inside my head, I spent the afternoon before my last show at Barking Legs going to the local Civil War battle sites. Many major fights happened here during the Fall of 1863: Missionary Ridge! Lookout Mountain! Chickamauga! At long last I get to prowl the battle site at Chickamauga. In my book *Shirts & Skin* I describe my first impression of Alistair, when we met in London, as “the look of
a scared Scots-Irish boy about to be slaughtered at Chickamauga”—so of course I have to go see what ghosts dwell there.

I wanted to walk these battlefields—to savor the narratives echoing there—even as I continue finding myself in the middle of my own mini Civil War. Allow me a moment of drama-queenism: the images of the protesters waving the rebel flag, so fresh in my mind, made me realize how much the war is still going on. As I look over battle maps in the Civil War book from my childhood, I see so clearly a connection between then and what I am doing now. Another piece of the ongoing struggle to make this fucked up country less fucked up, to make more airspace for more different kinds of people. The front lines have changed and the *dramatis personae* have shifted somewhat. The flags are pretty similar, though we might add a few more colors for a rainbow flag. All our nation’s civil wars surround us everyday. I hope that this week in Chattanooga I have managed to make a little more breathing room for queer people and their friends.

I drove the few miles into North Georgia to Chickamauga. After a depressingly ugly series of chicken stands and used car lots, the battlefield has the prim tidiness typical of the National Park Service. It was a relief to leave the grim storefronts (*Battlefield Muffler and Radiator*) and tawdry billboards (*Good Cars for Good Christian People*) of the highway and pull into green Chickamauga.

As I walked the vast, lush landscape looking for Snodgrass Hill where Union General George Thomas, “the Rock of Chickamauga,” saved the Federal troops from a total rout (I know this stuff, I can’t help it!), I thought about my own little corner of history, my own performance-art Snodgrass Hill as it were. I know have a big story to tell right now. It fills my memory. It’s a story of how I met a man from another land and how I want to be with him, but my country, which I both love and hate, doesn’t allow such things. I need to tell this story or I will go crazy. When I tell my story I can howl out the rage I feel both at our medieval government and my own shortcomings as a man and a lover. I can draw attention to the injustice. This
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telling becomes a completely necessary act, an act of looking at the past as a means of negotiating a more empowered and grounded relationship to an uncertain future. Each in our own way, Alistair and I are tending our memory as a way of creating a future together.

I wandered back to the car and drove back toward Chattanooga. My last stop on my war tour was Orchard Knob, at the foot of Missionary Ridge. There’s a big monument there in the midst of greater Chattanooga. On the ground surrounding the marble cupola dedicated to Illinois or Iowa was debris from contemporary battles: a quart bottle of King Cobra Malt Liquor, a Big Burger Bag, and three red used Hygeia condoms, still moist from their recent action. How blurry the edges between what happened once and what breathes and struggles, triumphs and fails now! I recognize the swirl of this debris there at the battlefield monument. How familiar these struggles seem to me when I consider my own life: the slaughter of so many of my comrades-in-love by AIDS, the posturing of Carolina senators, the human frailty of all of us, the sex and love moist under the pocked and gray marble of our history.

Later that night after the final show, I went outside on Dodds Avenue after all the protesters had gone home. After I thanked the African-American cop for looking after us, he said to me, “Oh, it’s no problem. Those folks started waving that damn flag in my face and I went and put tickets on all their cars. They got no business here. These gay folks are good neighbors. Live and let live, that’s what I say.” I felt buoyed by this expression of native good sense. I felt hopeful enough to go enjoy real Chattanooga barbecue with Ann, Bruce, and baby Leah.

On the plane back to Los Angeles, I was hypnotized by the rolling green beneath me. I realized again my completely unsubstantiated faith that if I tell my story to my country, I may be able to affect how the narrative will end. The hypocritical senator will be exposed, the lovers reunited, fairness will triumph—okay, I watched too many Capra movies as a kid! I perform stories of who I have been in order to imagine who I might become—who we might become.
It’s my own flag that I furl from theater marquees all across the land. In some ways the protesters in Chattanooga are right to try to silence these stories. Our narratives throw down an enormous challenge for our country to drag itself kicking and screaming into a new century and to finally create space for all of our voices.