



Casino Royale

Revue brings a show biz buffet to Sonoma

by Jim Gladstone

"You normally wouldn't see this big of a gay explosion in Sonoma County," jokes Duane Wells, the promoter of *Revue*, a performance and party extravaganza to be held on the Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Day weekend at Rohnert Park's Graton Resort Casino.

Wells has put together a mind-boggling, gender-bending roster of talent for two nights of sparkly, sexy, hot messy fun. Lady Bunny, Jackie Beat, Martha Wash, Jimmy James, Joey Arias, and internet eye-candy Davey Wavey are just some of the names who will appear at the first major gay-focused entertainment event at the 13-month old casino, located less than an hour north of San Francisco.

A pop-besotted polymath, the Los Angeles-based Wells' unlikely career path has taken him from a Georgetown degree in finance to a Manhattan corporate job with Liz Claiborne to UCLA law school and eventually to his current gig as a freelance travel and lifestyle writer –and accidental casino impresario.

Among Wells' current freelance writing projects is developing LGBT content for the Sonoma County Tourism website (www.sonomacounty.com). Last year, while doing research for the site, Wells interviewed Greg Sarris, tribal chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. Sarris, a Stanford alumnus, novelist, and filmmaker, noted that the tribe's then- brand new casino had done little outreach to the gay market in San Francisco and the North Bay.

Elsewhere, that market has proven a lucrative one for the gaming industry. Casino operators in Las Vegas and Atlantic City regularly run advertisements and promotions to attract gay visitors. Given the size of the LGBT population that lives in driving distance of southern Sonoma County, Sarris –who wrote about gay Native Americans in his 1999 novel *Watermelon Nights* – as a natural for Graton.

In short order, Duane Wells received a call from Joe Hasson, Vice President and General Manager of the casino, asking for assistance in planning some events to help introduce the region's gay audiences to the venue. Between his past experience helping organize benefit events for several AIDS and LGBT organizations and an address book full of contacts from celebrity interviews he'd conducted as a writer, Wells agreed to helm the effort.



Martha Wash

"We've had events with the Sonoma GayDar community group and we've had gay bingo nights," said Hasson last week, "But *Revue* is the first themed entertainment on this scale. We're only a year and a half old, so a lot of what we do promotionally is about awareness. We want to get people in the door for the first time, then hopefully they'll come back."

"I hadn't done anything like this in ages." Wells recalls, "But I love entertainment and I have some low-hanging fruit in my life."

Among the ripest is one of Wells' close friends in Los Angeles, a talent manager who represents "about a third of the acts on the bill." Lady Bunny and Candis Cayne are old acquaintances from Wells' years in New York.



Lady Bunny

Hasson says that while he expects much of *Revue's* audiences to be gay, there is enough crossover appeal in the likes of Martha Wash and Broadway star Levi Kreis –who won a Tony as Jerry Lee Lewis in *Million Dollar Quartet* – to attract a mixed crowd to the shows, which will also feature a live six-piece, two-vocalist house band.

"Graton didn't want to hide us away," Wells acknowledges. "It wasn't about quietly courting gay business. I'd originally chosen a fairly intimate space for the post-party, but they really wanted it to be in the SkyBar, which is their largest lounge. It's the focal point of the entire casino. It's a coming out party of sorts."

The two-hour-plus performances will take place in a non-descript event space that Wells has contracted Matthew Finlason of HGTV fame to stage in the style of an underground Berlin cabaret.

"Seating is going to be at four-top tables," says Wells, "to help create the atmosphere of an old-fashioned nightclub where you really would see a variety revue, with a combination of music and comedy like we are going to feature."

While Lady Bunny, Jackie Beat, and Jimmy James will each perform in just one of the two shows, most will play both nights, including a pair of the most intriguing headliners—one a seasoned pro, the other making a Bay Area debut—Candis Cayne and Ryan Raftery.



Candis Cayne

Candis Cayne

Way back in 2007, well before Laverne Cox made waves on *Orange is the New Black*, Candis Cayne became the first transgender actress to ever play a major recurring role on network television. Sensitively playing Carmelita Rainer—trans mistress of Billy Baldwin's Patrick Darling IV—on the underappreciated ABC drama *Dirty Sexy Money*. Recently appearing on the CBS Sherlock Holmes update *Elementary*, she is also the first transgender actress to ever play major recurring roles on *two* network series.

Cayne will serve as *Revue's* master of ceremonies and perhaps indulge the audience in some syncing and dancing. She'll also be available, along with other performers, to meet, greet, and accept due homage from fans at the post-show party.

"That's a heavy question," Cayne replies when asked about the enormous amount of media attention paid to Cox. "On the one hand, I'm very proud of Laverne, but of course I'd like to be getting more work, too."

"When I started on *Dirty Sexy Money*, being trans was still kind of unknown to the general public. And the relationship my character was in on the show was overall a very positive, romantic relationship. So I like to think it opened some people's eyes."



Jacob Lusk

"I'm very proud of being trans and of whatever I've done to push society forward. The entertainment industry is cyclical. Yes, it's been slow for me recently, but I'm still doing my thing, still auditioning. I go through life with a smile and try to be positive."

Born on the island of Maui in 1971 as Brendan McDaniel, Cayne became a staple of the Manhattan club scene in the early 1990s, when she still identified as a drag queen.

"New York at that time was kind of magical," she recalls. "Well, I guess New York is magical anytime you're there and in your twenties, but the terror of AIDs was starting to subside a bit and it was a whole decade before 9-11. There was a renaissance of big clubs and small gorgeous lounges. It wasn't unusual for me to go to six or seven parties a night. I met a *lot* of people!"

She also kickstarted her career, appearing on film in *Wigstock*, *The Movie* and the criminally little known *Stonewall* which, like *Dirty Sexy Money*, blended comedy and drama in ways that may have been uncomfortable for mass audiences.

Despite the occasional career lull, after spending the past six years in Los Angeles, Cayne takes pleasure moving through life at a less amped up pace.

"Something amazing happens with age," she says. "The idea of wanting to please strangers on the street wanes, and the idea of being happier with the life you're living grows. I'm all about teaching and encouraging the younger generation of trans people to embrace the good in their lives and to live authentically, whatever that means to each one of them."



Ryan Raftery

Ryan Raftery

"If you want to know about me, YouTube me," jokes Ryan Raftery in his Facebook bio, "I'm right there in those videos. There is nothing else."

Well, there's nothing on the internet to answer the question that *Revue* audiences will undoubtedly be asking after seeing Raftery portray Anna Wintour in excerpts from his essentially-one-man musical, *Ryan Raftery is the Most Powerful Woman in Fashion*: "Why on earth hasn't this guy played San Francisco before?"

"You know, it's on my shortlist, but I have a day job," says the disarmingly earnest Brooklyn native. After graduating from NYU's Tisch School of Performing Arts, Raftery briefly moved to LA hoping to find film and TV work. He got the occasional guest shot on shows including *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Law & Order: SVU*, and *Ugly Betty*.

"My problem in LA," recalls the boyish Raftery, "is that I have a baritone voice and the face of a tenor." Frustrated by the lack of opportunities, he returned to New York, took office jobs, and persistently mounted a series of well-reviewed pop music pastiches at Manhattan venues including Joe's Pub and the Laurie Beechman Theater.

With titles including *Ryan Raftery and Friends: A Solo Act* and *Ryan Raftery is Black and Better Than Ever* (about his adolescent infatuation with R&B), the shows drew deeply from the well of autobiography.



Levi Kreis

"I did five shows that were all built around a heightened version of myself and events from my life, and I was still in my twenties" he says. "I started to get scared, because I had absolutely no more personal experience to riff about."

In late 2013, Raftery was working at Coach when he began noodling with the idea of putting together a show about the fashion business. "I'm genuinely fascinated with Anna Wintour. I think she's got a huge amount of unchecked power, like some combination of Darth Vader and Hilary Clinton."

While he was coming up with some good schtick, Raftery was having trouble coming up with a plotline to hold his material together. "And then," he recalls, "In April of 2014, Kim and Kanye were on the cover of *Vogue* and there was a huge industry backlash against Wintour."

"I got lucky with that," says Raftery. "Nobody ever thinks of Anna Wintour of being scared, which was a very interesting idea. So in the show, she's been called into a meeting with Si Newhouse and she's afraid she's about to be fired. I was able to weave in a lot of material from my research. She's been very forthcoming in interviews about her father's death, her relationships with her siblings, and that all helped me think about what she'd be like in this situation."

Wintour's daughter Bee caught Raftery's act during its sold-out run last fashion week, effectively offering her blessing when she posed for photos with Raftery in his blond wig and oversized sunglasses.

A further blessing from the queens of San Francisco is imminent.



Jimmy James

Free bus transit from SF

Complimentary round-trip bus transportation for *Revue* ticket holders is being offered between San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and the Graton Resort Casino each night, with departures at 4:30 and 5:00 pm from the city, and returns at 11pm and 1:30am from Rohnert Park. Seats on the bus must be requested and reserved by emailing revuegraton@gmail.com . One bus each evening will be hosted by fashion maestros Richie Rich and Traver Rains of Heatherette, assuring the party gets rolling extra early.

