



News from the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus

Powerful Message, Music Highlight AGMC's 'Shaken Not Heard' April 24-26 at Oakhurst Baptist

— *Decatur's Historic Church, Important Civil and Gay Rights Site, An Appropriate Venue
for Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus Landmark Three Performances on Sexuality, Faith and Reconciliation*

March 24, 2009 — Every hero's journey begins with a call to adventure. The road of trials, a goal achieved and a triumphant return is the story of any gay man coming to terms with factions, faiths and followings that shun him.

In a series of groundbreaking performances Friday, Saturday and Sunday, April 24-26 at Decatur's historic Oakhurst Baptist Church, the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus and special guests will explore the tenuous relationship between homosexuality and organized religion with the premiere of a new work - *Shaken, Not Heard: Stories of Gay Men, Faith and Reconciliation*. Inspired by real-life struggles from members of the chorus and featuring a powerfully broad range of sacred and secular music from around the world, the landmark concert event is poised to fuel spirited discussions on the topic of gay persons and their place in religious society.

Narrated by Christian de la Huerta, founder of Revolutionary Wisdom and author of the critically acclaimed book *Coming Out Spiritually*, this thought-provoking event also includes a display of the powerful Shower of Stoles Project.

Taken from Real-life Struggles

Shaken, Not Heard was inspired both by the writings of de la Huerta as well as a number of members of the chorus. Last fall, AGMC members were invited to submit personal accounts of having grown up in a religious environment, what it was like to wrestle the inherent conflict between faith and homosexuality, and what process - if any - they found to reconcile the two.

Over a third of the chorus' 120 members shared emotional sentiments ranging from heartfelt to humorous. The creative team, comprised of Artistic Director Kevin Robison and the chorus' music advisory group, set out to create an unforgettable evening of monologues and music - an approach that has previously been used successfully by a handful of other gay men's choruses.

But when the AGMC creators noticed striking similarities between the stories, they became interested in taking the idea a step further: What if the events the men wrote about were woven together into a single story - that of one gay man's journey to hell and back? As circumstances from different lives were woven together, a single voice quickly began to develop: the character of David, a gay man who wrestles the Goliath of organized religion.

As David's story took shape, the team chose music that would complement the drama and move the story forward. Robison calls the score a pastiche of styles that include a Spanish medieval ballad, a German art song, American hymn arrangements, musical theatre numbers and two pieces written specifically for the event.

"We took inspiration from real-life struggles of chorus members to build a universal story," said member Doug Gathers, who suggested the title and wrote lyrics for one of the comedic numbers. "Chapters of the story are woven together with a broad range of music, delivering a powerful message that evokes intense emotions on many levels."

Artistic Director Robison noted that "We worked hard to choose music that would be an extension of the story. It took some time to pull the pieces together, but I think we've created an exceptionally strong work."

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Finding A Single Voice Among Many

Robison admits his extensive theatrical background contributed to the development of *Shaken, Not Heard*, particularly with respect to five additional characters that were created to underscore the universality of the material.

"Because the story needed to maintain a sense of cohesion, sections of the original material couldn't be included in David's journey," Robison noted. "There were many sentiments and concepts that still needed a voice. It also seemed that in spite of how compelling the composite story was, the evening still lacked a beginning and end, so we explored the possibility of other perspectives that might bookend the narrative. What emerged were five characters from different religious upbringings that would launch David's story and bring it full circle."

The writings and teachings of Christian de la Huerta, who will be narrating the weekend of concert events, are also present in the dialogue between the five men.

"In *Coming Out Spiritually*, Christian outlines 10 spiritual archetypes that gay men have assumed throughout history - roles we continue to enact in modern society, such as creator of beauty, mediator, shaman and healer," Robison stated. "Evidence has shown that prior to patriarchal times, gay men were revered by society for filling these essential roles."

"Of course once organized religion became a tool for controlling the masses, gay men and women were considered a threat," he continued. "Christian teaches us the importance of reclaiming our rightful place in society. This is the basis of *Shaken, Not Heard's* powerful final moments."

de la Huerta, whose writing has also appeared in *The Advocate*, *Genre*, *OUT* and other publications, is the founder and president of Q- Spirit, a division of Revolutionary Wisdom devoted to catalyzing the necessary conditions for queer people to fully claim their spiritual roles of service, leadership and community enrichment in the world.

"An event like this is yet another step toward healing the split many of us feel between our spirituality and our sexuality," de la Huerta said from Miami in a recent phone interview. "I feel honored and privileged to be collaborating with Kevin and the AGMC members on this exciting and significant project."

Oakhurst Baptist Appropriate Venue for the Three Concerts

Shaken, Not Heard is currently scheduled to be presented in three performances Friday, April 24 (8 p.m.), Saturday, April 25 (8 p.m.) and Sunday, April 26 (3 p.m.) at Decatur's historic Oakhurst Baptist Church - a congregation removed from the rosters of the Georgia and Southern Baptist conventions because of its affirming position on homosexuality.

A short break will follow the continuous 75-minute concert, after which audience members will have the option to return for a moderated panel discussion with de la Huerta, Robison, members of the creative team and special guests, including writer/director Del Shores (*Sordid Lives*, *Queer As Folk*), who will be among the panelists on Friday evening, just before he premieres his new one-man show in a late night performance at Actor's Express. Robison noted that the panelists are still being scheduled and are different for each performance.

Also among the panelists will be openly gay pastor Bradley Schmeling of St. John's Lutheran Church - an Atlanta congregation that was thrust into the national spotlight in 2007 when The Rev. Schmeling was put on trial before the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for engaging in a sexual relationship outside of marriage.

"We're very excited by the support we are receiving from religious leaders for this concert," said AGMC Executive Director Brenda Pruitt. "In addition to Pastor Schmeling, we've received strong support from other nationally recognized leaders on the subject of homosexuality and religion, including author Daniel Helminiak and the Human Rights Campaign's Religion and Faith Program Director, Harry Knox."

Knox, who will be speaking at a clergy event hosted by the chorus on March 31, noted that "God gives us the gift of being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. With that gift comes responsibility to shine in spite of all that would drive us into darkness. *Shaken, Not Heard* is extremely important in that regard."

Related Events: Clergy Dialogue, Spirituality Workshop, Shower of Stoles Project

Clergy Dialogue, March 31 — Knox, Schmeling, Helminiak and The Rev. Carolyn Mobley of the Metropolitan Community Church will comprise the guest speakers at "Gay Men, Faith and Reconciliation: A Private Dialogue for Clergy of All Faiths," a special event for clergy to be held Tuesday evening, March 31.

"Our goal with this private event for clergy is to keep this important dialogue alive leading up to our performances," Robison continued. "Our hope is that clergy who struggle to address this topic in their congregations can benefit from attending this dialogue and perhaps generate a discussion with their church members. And I think attending *Shaken, Not Heard* also would be a very useful component of that dialogue."

Gay Spirituality Workshop, April 25 — In addition to narrating the concert program, de la Huerta will host a "Coming Out Spiritually" workshop on Saturday, April 25 as part of the performance weekend events. The workshop is sponsored by Gay Spirit Visions of Atlanta, a group focused on healing and strengthening spiritual identity by helping people connect or reconnect sexuality and spirituality in their lives.

Shower of Stoles Project - The Shower of Stoles is a collection of over 1,000 liturgical stoles and other sacred items representing the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people of faith. Contributing religious leaders have served in 32 denominations and faith traditions in six countries on three continents. Each stole contains the story of an GLBT person active in the life and leadership of his or her faith community in some way: minister, elder, deacon, teacher, missionary, musician, administrator or active layperson.

This extraordinary collection celebrates the gifts of GLBT persons who serve their higher being in countless ways, while also lifting up those who have been excluded from service because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The collection bears witness to the huge loss of leadership that the church has brought upon itself because of its own unjust policies.

Approximately 50 stoles will be on display at Oakhurst Baptist Church throughout the weekend of the three performances of *Shaken, Not Heard*.

Tickets Now on Sale

Tickets for *Shaken, Not Heard*, and mini- season tickets for both *Shaken* and the summer show, "*Lush Life: The Music of Billy Strayhorn*," are now on sale online at www.agmchorus.org. (*Lush Life* will be presented at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, July 31 and Aug. 1, in Symphony Hall of the Woodruff Arts Center.) Tickets for the single upcoming concert range from \$10 to \$45 (some prices available only online). Gold, Silver and Bronze-level mini-season packages are available at a 15-percent discount over single-concert rates. Only AGMC season subscribers receive the best seats at all venues, unlimited exchange privileges, and additional tickets at a 10-percent discount.

Oakhurst Baptist Church, the performance venue, is located at 222 E. Lake Drive in Decatur.

For more information about *Shaken, Not Heard* or the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus, see the AGMC's web site or call the chorus at (404) 320-1030.

About the AGMC

Musical excellence. High-energy entertainment. Community service. Camaraderie. *Pride*.

For over a quarter of a century, the AGMC has been a voice for diversity and inclusiveness, presenting high- quality musical entertainment that positively represents the gay community while serving the entire community at large.

The chorus and its select ensemble, Panache, have shared the stage with such notables as former poet laureate Maya Angelou, actor Leslie Jordan, The Atlanta Opera, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Atlanta Ballet, Turtle Creek Chorale, the International Gay Men's Chorus of Paris, and many more. The AGMC is a proud member of GALA Choruses, the international Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, and Chorus America, a group of over 1,600 choruses, individuals and businesses dedicated to the continued expansion of the choral movement in North America.

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