

By Jeff Rossen

# Critique Corner

## IN THE DARKNESS, A LIGHT OF TRUTH

While leaving Stage 773 (formerly Theatre Building Chicago) following the opening night performance of Bailiwick Chicago's local premiere of Joe DiPietro's **"Fucking Men,"** I noticed the image of Serena Williams staring up from the cover of the latest issue of *Uptown* magazine. But while it was the tennis marvel who caught my eye, it was the blurb about one of the other stories contained inside that really struck me: "Is Monogamy Really Dead?" What may be intended as a "hook" to grab the attention of casual observer who may glance at the cover and then pick it up on impulse, the headline was an unexpected question about what had just transpired in the theater space a mere 50 feet away.

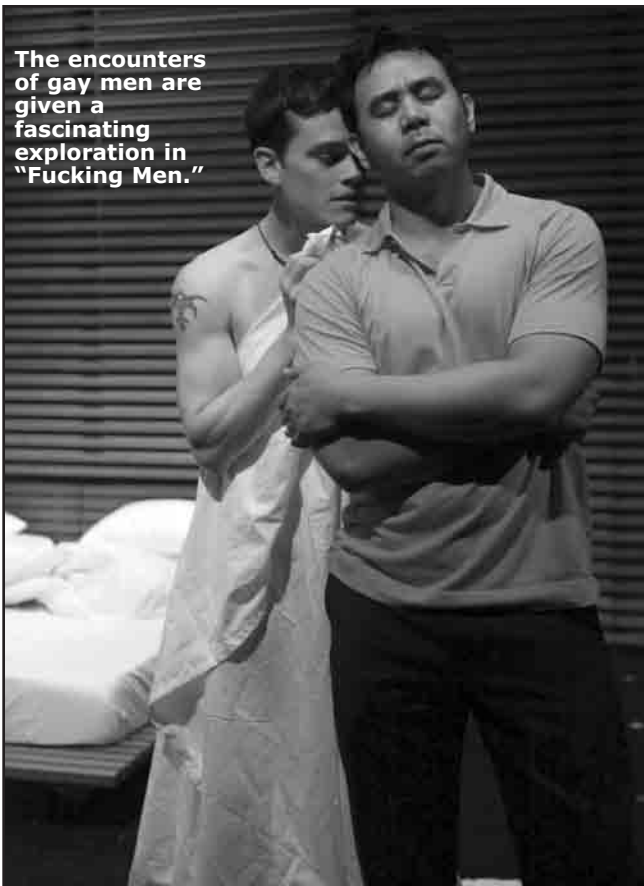
Through the course of 10 scenes, the same number of characters come together in various pairings for encounters that begin as nothing more than a chance to share a sexual experience. As the action, as it were, moves from encounter to encounter, one of the characters from the prior scene moves to the next and on to a new partner. The premise is drawn from Arthur

Schnitzler's early 20th-century play "La Ronde," but playwright Joe DePietro has reworked it to explore current sexual and emotional relationships between modern gay men. His resulting "Fucking Men" and Bailiwick's production of it is, quite simply, sensational.

In the 10 characters who weave a sexual variation on the silly "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game, we're introduced to an assortment of "types" – an actor, a hustler, a bisexual college kid, a longtime couple, and others – who might have suffered the fate of being reduced to caricatures. But DiPietro's funny, insightful, provocative and unexpectedly moving script makes this daisy chain of dalliances an absorbing and shrewd observation and commentary on how we connect with others, regardless of the fact that these are gay men. Well, almost. The sex is gay sex, from a broom closet quickie between the actor and a playwright to a straight soldier looking for oral sex in a park to a closeted journalist paying for an overnight hustler. But DiPietro uses these shared physical experiences to examine the "why" more than the "how" of the encounters. And under Tom Mullen's keenly focused and perceptive direction of the flawlessly cast ensemble, "Fucking Men" evolves into a fascinating exploration of love, lust and longing. It's about compromise and selfishness, truthfulness and deceit, fulfillment and disappointment.

A soldier (Cameron Harms) goes to a park looking for a blowjob from a hustler (Arthur Luis Soria) and ends up forever changed by the experience. The soldier shares a steam room encounter with a graduate student (Armand Fields), whose tutoring session with a college kid (Cameron Johnson) becomes a lesson of a different sort for the young student. The college guy has an online hookup with an older man (Thad Anzur) who only searches out this kind of sex because his partner (Karmann Bajuyo) does the same, but the partner's one-nighter with a bartender who's a rising porn star (Christian Kain Blackburn) makes him reexamine the couple's one-night-only rule. The porn star picks up a playwright (Ryan Lanning) who isn't used to hooking up with someone as young and pretty as this, and when a famous actor (Beau Forbes) comes to see the playwright's latest production (DiPietro has great fun here sort of lampooning the very premise of "Fucking Men"), their backstage session turns into a life-changing moment for the actor. He decides to come out on the TV show of a well-known journalist (Norm Woodel) who's still getting over the death of his "business associate" and sees a chance to help someone struggling to find love and a future in the hustler, who he's hired for the night.

While all the actors here deliver fine work, there are some truly exceptional performances that stand out from the excellent ensemble: Lanning's nervous



The encounters of gay men are given a fascinating exploration in "Fucking Men."

uncertainty that evolves into a steely confidence; Harms' violent and confused struggle over the soldier's identity; Johnson's frenetic energy and charming guile; Woodel's movingly revealing of a quiet inner struggle; and the sweet and welcoming confidence of Soria's hustler that has a profound effect on those who come into his life.

A sparse yet wonderfully effective scenic design by John Rotonda helps the scenes shift nearly effortlessly into each other, and there's great atmosphere provided by Jared Moore's often-dramatic lighting. Character-perfect costuming by Bill Morey and the enriching sound design by Michael Dunbar and original music by Laurence Mark Wythe add greatly to the production's power.

The hustler tells the soldier not to worry, that it's "just you and me in the dark, taking care of business." But what happens under in cloak of the shadows can affect who we are in the light, and "Fucking Men" is an intriguing and highly recommended journey between the two. (★★★★)

*"Fucking Men" runs through July 25 at Stage 773, 1225 W. Belmont. 773-327-5252 or fmenchicago.com.)*

**COME TO THE CABARET**  
Teaming up to dip into the Great American Songbook, **Kat' Taylor** and **Bob Moreen** join their marvelous musical talents for "**Random Act of Joy**," a celebration of some of the most enduring and endearing songs ever written, from the pens of George and Ira Gershwin, Lennon and McCartney, Duke Ellington and many, many more. Taylor and Moreen perform at the Wilmette Theatre, 1122 Central in Wilmette, July 19. For tickets or more info, call 847-251-7424 or visit [wilmettetheatre.com](http://wilmettetheatre.com).

The downtown theater district is a busy, busy place most nights, but on Monday nights the place to be is

Petterino's, where **Beckie Menzie** and **Denise McGowan** host their "**Monday Night Live**" showcase, which is coming up on its three-year anniversary. Local and visiting artists pack the place for a chance to perform for the usually overflowing crowd. The show begins at 7:30 p.m., and reservations are highly recommended. In addition to the great music, Petterino's also offers a tasty "7 After 7" three-course dinner for only \$19.95 per person. And there's free valet parking, too. In the Loop! Can't beat this combination. For reservations and info, call 312-422-0150 or check it out online at [pettierinos.com](http://pettierinos.com).

One of the most popular midweek musical oases can be found at Club 3160, where **Paul Marinaro** entertains the clubgoers every Wednesday night starting at 9 p.m. Marinaro teams with pianist **Jeremy Kahn** and bass player **Joe Policastro**, and the trio often play host to special guests and surprise visitors who drop in regularly.

On Tuesday nights at Club 3160 anyone can be a star, thanks to the dazzling musical talents of **Dan Stetzel**, who welcomes all to the mic for the club's weekly **Open Mic**. Drop in for a listen, and you may hear the next big star or some major artist who comes by to entertain alongside the up-and-comers.

For the past 12 years, **Tracy Adams** has made Davenport's his cabaret home, and this month he debuts his 15th show at the club, "**Most Likely to Succeed**." Voted the title by his senior high school



**Paul Marinaro performs on Wednesdays at Club 3160.**

class, Adams takes a look at his journey from then to now and just what "success" means at this stage in life. Adams performs on Sundays, July 11, 18 & 25, at 7 p.m. For reservations, call 773-278-1830 or click [davenportspianobar.com](http://davenportspianobar.com).

Returning to Davenport's after a sold-out engagement last year is **Andrea Marcovicci**, who celebrates the 100th birthday anniversary of one of musical theater's great songwriters with "**If I Were a Bell: The Song of Frank Loesser**" July 14-17. As one of cabaret's most highly regarded artists, reservations for Marcovicci's four-night engagement are a must. You can make them online at [davenportscabaret.com](http://davenportscabaret.com) or by phone at 773-278-1830.

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